Computer active
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From the Editor

Combined, Apple and Google have nearly five million apps on their stores – and many are total rubbish. Neither company cares too much about quality. As long as an app doesn't boast shamelessly about hacking your bank account, both seem happy to stock any old junk.

To find decent apps among this dross you need to be either extremely patient or extraordinarily lucky. Robert Irvine was the former when spending the past month testing hundreds of new and updated apps. Most were so bad he uninstalled them within seconds. But a select group of 25 met his high standards and have survived to be recommended in our Cover Feature.

His suggestions cover everything you use your phone and tablet for, including radio, music, photos, videos, email, browsing the web (privately) and sharing files. None of them pester you with intrusive ads, or force you to pay to use the best features.

And they're all better than many big-name apps that are now past their best. Let me know which you've started using.

Daniel Booth
editor@computeractive.co.uk

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HOW TO USE SNIPCA URLs

We use snipcas to turn long URLs that are hard to type into ones that are short and simple. They aren't websites themselves, which means they won't be recognised if you type them into Google. Instead, you need to type them into your browser address bar, then press Enter. Doing this will take you to the correct website.

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Subscribe now – and save 30%!
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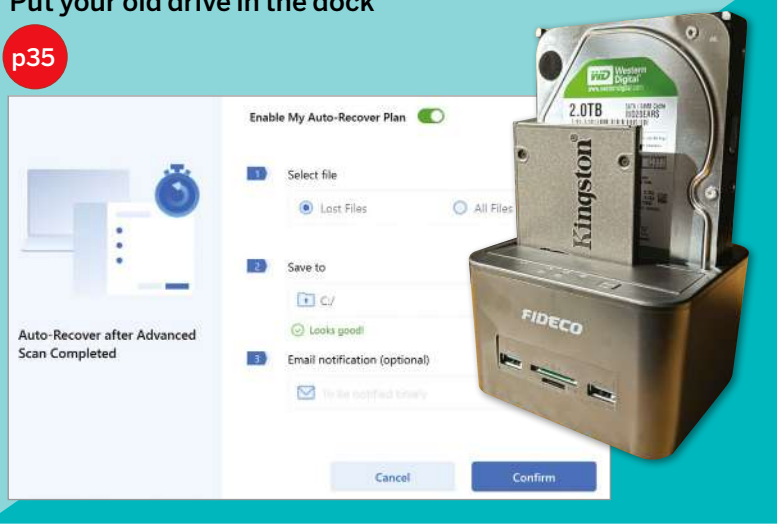

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Pull the plug on fake chargers

Govt wants fewer telegraph poles used for broadband

The Government wants broadband firms to scale back the use of telegraph poles when installing new full-fibre connections.

Digital Infrastructure Minister Julia Lopez has urged network operators like BT's Openreach and Virgin Media O2 to do "everything possible" to share existing equipment or use underground cables before erecting poles – some of which are 30-feet high.

The rapid rollout of new full-fibre networks since 2019 has led to more telegraph poles being used. It's cheaper and easier to put these up than to lay cables underground. However, it has led to growing complaints from residents who say poles make their local area look ugly.

In January, MPs for Hull and East Yorkshire met with executives at local broadband firm KCOM to highlight the impact on communities.

Sir David Davis, Conservative MP for Haltemprice and Howden, said residents felt like they are "simply being swept aside by companies doing what best suits them".

Dame Diana Johnson, Labour MP for Kingston upon Hull North, said "unwanted telegraph poles have been cluttering Hull streets, appearing in often inappropriate places and without consultation".

There have also been protests in Fife, Peterlee, Plymouth, Southampton, Southport and Totnes (see box below left).

As well as objecting to their appearance, residents have complained about potential damage to poles from storms. They also claim they weren't fully consulted before the work was done.

Planning rules were relaxed in 2017 so that broadband firms don't have to get approval from local councils for either the equipment they install or where they plan to put it.

Current laws force companies to share infrastructure where possible, and BT must let rivals use its ducts and poles to build their own networks.

Ms Lopez said that Ofcom could take action against companies if they failed to comply with these regulations.

In her letter to broadband firms Lopez said that poles should only be erected where it wasn't "reasonably practical" to install underground lines (see www.snipca.com/49750).

She warned that companies risk losing "vital community support" if they put up poles unnecessarily. Companies must also ensure the infrastructure would not obstruct traffic or "unduly impact the visual amenity of the local area".

Around 80 per cent of the UK is now covered by full-fibre broadband, up from just six per cent in 2019. The Government wants to reach 85 per cent by 2025.

Steve Leighton, chairman of the Internet Service Providers' Association (ISPA), said firms understand the concerns, and that "wherever possible our members are using underground ducts or existing infrastructure to build their networks".

He added that poles are needed where it's not "viable" to use other methods.

WHAT WE THINK

Nobody thinks telegraph poles are pretty, but they're quick and cheap to install. Without them, the phenomenal rollout of full-fibre broadband since 2019 wouldn't have happened. However, there's no doubt that many residents have felt their concerns have been ignored. And in some areas the rush to hit broadband targets has led to poles being used where otherwise cables would have been laid underground. This has brought full-fibre to more households faster, but many residents would have preferred to wait longer if it meant fewer poles blighting their community.

WHERE PROTESTS HAVE TAKEN PLACE

- **May 2021** Peterlee
- **Oct 2021** Southampton
- **Feb 2022** Totnes
- **July 2022** Fife
- **Dec 2022** Plymouth
- **June 2023** Willersey
- **Aug 2023** Burnley
- **Nov 2023** Hull
- **Dec 2023** Worcester
- **Jan 2024** Beverley
- **Feb 2024** Dudley
- **March 2024** Southport

You'll like this...
Office 2024 will be available without a subscription (www.snipca.com/49760)

but not this...
Microsoft is showing pop-ups in Chrome promoting Bing (www.snipca.com/49761)

More broadband firms pledge to 'protect' telecare customers

Most of the companies that provide the UK's broadband infrastructure have now signed a Government charter committing them to protecting customers with telecare devices when upgrading old copper phone lines to the new digital network.

Eight firms signed up in mid-March: CityFibre, AllPoints Fibre, CommunityFibre, Ogi, Openreach, KCOM, Sky and WightFibre. This follows BT, Sky Broadband, TalkTalk and Virgin signing up in December.

It means the Government has now got commitments from most of the UK's major telecoms firms.

The charter calls on the firms to "take steps to ensure their customers' lifesaving buttons continue to work and functioning alternatives are in place before any migration takes place".

One of these steps will be for infrastructure companies to check with broadband and phone providers whether their customers use a telecare alarm.

They'll then need to give phone companies 12 months' notice when moving a customer to digital, and discuss with them the best way to transfer that customer.

The charter also says that "no telecare user will be migrated to a digital landline service without the provider, customer or telephone company confirming that they have a functioning solution in place".

In addition, infrastructure firms will work with Ofcom, the Government and phone providers to create "a shared definition" of what's meant by a 'vulnerable' customer.

This will establish an industry-wide standard that's no longer dependent on a specific company.

Technology Secretary Michelle Donelan said that the "safety of vulnerable customers comes before anything else and that's why I called on the industry to listen to concerns and take action to make sure the right protections are in place" (see www.snipca.com/49659).

All operators are in the process of retiring the copper network by December 2025 and switching customers to full-fibre.

Switch broadband with 'one touch' from September

You'll be able to switch broadband in 'one touch' from 12 September, after companies agreed to a new deadline for the much-delayed service.

The One Touch Switch (OTS) scheme will make it easier to switch between services that use different cable networks, such as from BT (which uses Openreach) to Virgin Media – or vice versa.

Under the scheme, your new provider will handle every aspect of your switch, including asking your old provider for your final bill.

Telecoms regulator Ofcom initially set an April 2023 deadline for internet providers to set up a one-touch scheme. It also called for companies to switch customers within 24 hours "where technically possible", instead of the current 10 days.

But the One Touch Switching Company (TOTSCo, https://totsco.org.uk), which is in charge of implementing the change, said it wouldn't be ready by then. It set a new deadline of March 2024, but said in December that it would miss this also because it hadn't had time to test the scheme.

However, TOTSCo now believes that all providers will be able to hit the new deadline of 12 September. Ofcom says it has received written assurances from BT, Sky, TalkTalk and Virgin Media that this date is achievable.

The regulator said that the continued delays by the industry "have ultimately caused customers to lose out on the benefits of a quicker and more effective switching process".

It added that once OTS has launched it will "review the conduct" of providers to make sure they are letting customers switch quickly.

IN BRIEF

giffgaff

GIFFGAFF CUTS ITS UNLIMITED PLAN BY £10

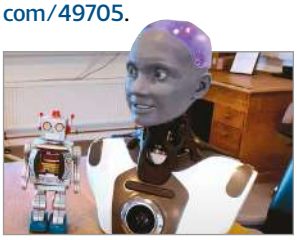
Giffgaff has cut the cost of its unlimited SIM deal by £10 to £25 a month on an 18-month contract. The package, which Giffgaff now calls the 'Good Contract', comes with unlimited UK data, calls and texts. It's available to both new and existing customers. For details visit www.snipca.com/49642.

MICROSOFT AXES ANDROID APPS ON W11

Microsoft is removing the option to run Android apps on Windows 11, which it had hailed as one of the operating system's key features. It launched the 'Windows Subsystem for Android' in 2022, letting you install apps from the Amazon Appstore. You can continue using it until March 2025, but you can no longer install new apps. Microsoft didn't say why it was closing the feature, but Amazon has details at www.snipca.com/49661.

TOMORROW'S WORLD

Move over Jon Culshaw and Alistair McGowan – Ameca is coming for you. The robot from Cornwall firm Engineered Arts can now impersonate people, including Morgan Freeman and Elon Musk, though its speciality is a Donald Trump speech in the voice of SpongeBob SquarePants. Watch at www.snipca.com/49705.



IN BRIEF

VIRGIN WILL BUY OLD GAMING CONSOLES
Virgin Media O2 has extended its recycling scheme to include unwanted Nintendo, PlayStation and Xbox gaming consoles. It will pay up to £283 for a PlayStation 5, up to £110 for a Nintendo Switch (OLED) and up to £238 for an Xbox Series X. Every device it receives will either be resold as refurbished or recycled, with "zero parts going to landfill". For details visit www.snipca.com/49735.

GOOGLE ONE PREMIUM ADDS NEST AWARE
Google has added Nest Aware to its One Premium package in the UK, giving subscribers online access to videos recorded by their Nest security cameras. Google One Premium costs £7.99 a month for 2TB of storage. You can also pay £1.59 a month for the Basic plan, which provides 100GB, but doesn't include Nest Aware. Sign up at www.snipca.com/49736.

THE WORLD'S GONE MAD!

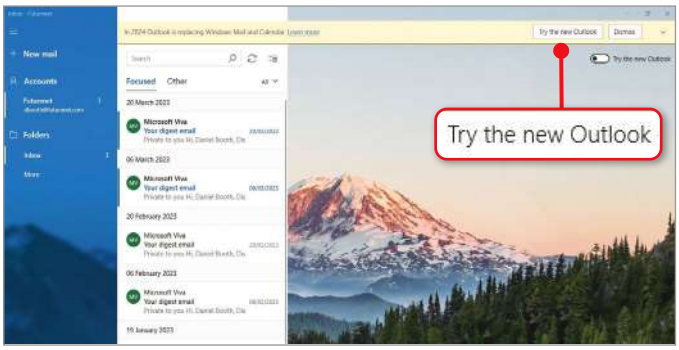
This is Boa the chihuahua, whose globe-trotting holidays and luxury wardrobe have earned him 170,000 followers on Instagram. But the Kennel Club says the popularity of such 'dog influencers' is putting at risk more traditional breeds such as the Irish Terrier. Those poor pups just aren't photogenic enough for the internet age.

Microsoft will support old Outlook until 2029

Microsoft has said it will continue to support the old 'classic' edition of Outlook until at least 2029, despite launching an updated version last year.

The new version, which Microsoft says has a "sleek and modern interface", has already replaced the old Mail and Calendar apps for Windows.

However, it isn't available to everyone yet. To check if you can use it, sign into Outlook and look for the 'Try the new Outlook' option at the top right (pictured above right). You can also install it from the Microsoft Store: www.snipca.com/49726.



Microsoft says the new Outlook is "getting closer to General Availability" as the company adds more features and fixes problems (see www.snipca.com/49725).

It's different in design to the old Mail app, but similar to the version of Outlook that's available online (www.outlook.com) and in Office.

One of the most useful new features is the ability to pin important emails to the top of your inbox so you can refer to them later. To do this, right-click an email and choose Pin. Pinned messages appear at the top of your inbox with a pin icon.

At some point Microsoft will make the new Outlook 'opt out'. This will make it the default version of the email tool, but you'll still be able to switch back. It said it will give 12-months' notice before doing this.

MARCH UPDATE FIXES FEBRUARY'S BUG

Microsoft's Patch Tuesday Windows 11 update for March fixes the problem with February's update not installing fully. The new update (KB5035853) addresses the bug in February's KB5034765 update, which was stalling at 96 per cent. Microsoft had previously advised uninstalling the **C:\$WinREAgent** folder.

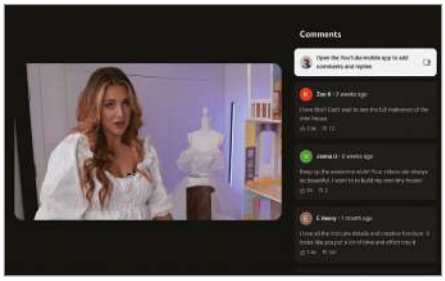
YouTube redesigns TV app to promote more products

YouTube has redesigned its TV app, making it easier to buy products that are promoted by celebrities and 'influencers'.

A new 'Products in this video' section will appear on screen whenever the presenter mentions items. It will contain a QR code that you can scan with your phone to visit a site where you can buy the product.

It's the most controversial aspect of a redesign that claims to offer a "richer, distraction-free TV experience" that viewers will feel "in control of" (see www.snipca.com/49734).

YouTube said its research found that viewers wanted videos to be smaller so it was easier for them to read comments while watching.



As a result, the redesign will make the Comments panel bigger on the right (see screenshot above right), rather than appearing over the video as it currently does.

It also gives more room to the video's description, likes and view counts.

YouTube said despite these changes, the main video actions (pause, rewind and fast-forward) will remain "easily accessible and intuitive".

Do you like this redesign? Let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk

Amazon removes BritBox from Prime Video as service ends

Amazon has stopped new viewers from subscribing to BritBox on Prime Video.

The move came a few days after ITV, which owns BritBox, said it would remove the service from Prime Video in the second quarter of 2024.

It seems that Amazon responded to ITV's announcement by removing the subscribe option. Existing subscribers will still be able to access BritBox until it's completely removed from Prime Video.

ITV had already said it will close BritBox's apps on 30 April, meaning it will stop working on smart TVs and streaming devices such as Amazon Fire Sticks and Roku players.

The move is part of ITV's plan to push viewers towards ITVX, which has offered BritBox content as part of the Premium package since launching in late 2022.

Most existing subscribers will be moved to ITVX Premium automatically, and pay the same fee of £5.99 a month or £59.99 a year. Viewers won't be able to transfer their viewing history or watchlist though.

All remaining BritBox subscriptions will be cancelled when the app closes. If you subscribed through iTunes, Roku, Google, BT or EE you'll receive a refund for any unused months left (www.snipca.com/49648).

In addition, ITV has removed its Catchup service from Prime Video, which for £3.99 a month allowed viewers to watch shows without adverts.

ITVX Premium also removes adverts from catch-up shows and films – see www.snipca.com/49647. It works on all devices except for Samsung TVs made before 2016.

Sad to see BritBox go? Happy to pay to remove ads? Let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk

Impose 'tougher sentences' for broadband damage

A group of small broadband providers have called for tougher sentences and fines for criminals who damage digital infrastructure and attack engineers.

It follows a rise in attacks against full-fibre networks that have left homes and businesses disconnected from the internet.

In January, vandals damaged cables run by Ogi, which provides internet access across parts of south Wales. The company suffered "extensive damage", and called on engineers to repair 600 metres of cable.

There have been similar attacks against Netomnia's YouFibre network in Liverpool and Pine Media in Sheffield.

Some of the attacks appear to be simple vandalism, while others are thefts of expensive equipment such as batteries and copper cables.

In response, the Independent Network Suppliers' Association (INCA), led by Ogi and London-based Vorboss, has written to Technology Secretary Michelle Donelan, saying that the penalties for damage should "reflect the potential risks to life and the critical role that full fibre plays in keeping our communities connected and safe".

It also wants the Government to make sure that the police prioritise investigations into such attacks.

Ogi's boss Ben Allwright said that working with the Government means small broadband providers can make sure the UK's digital infrastructure is "backed by laws that are fit for purpose".

He added stricter penalties will deter those "who aim to sabotage the connectivity we increasingly lean on for our working, social, and day-to-day lives".

IN BRIEF

OVER 15,000 ROKU ACCOUNTS HACKED

Hackers have accessed over 15,000 Roku accounts using login details taken from previous data leaks. They then changed the password and email addresses of the accounts and made purchases using the victims' credit-card details. Roku said it has secured the hacked accounts and asked the real owners to reset their passwords. Read Roku's 'Notice of data breach' at www.snipca.com/49710.

WATCH VIDEOS ON SPOTIFY PREMIUM

Spotify has added music videos but only for subscribers to its £10.99-a-month Premium package. When a song is playing, a button will appear saying "switch to video". They're available on Spotify's phone, desktop and TV apps, though there's a limited video selection at the moment. Visit Spotify's site for details: www.snipca.com/49709.

VLC MEDIA PLAYER MIGHT GO ONLINE

VLC's developers are building an online version of the popular media player, according to its creator and chief Jean-Baptiste Kempf. He added that the online VLC may provide access to internet TV channels. Version 4.0 of the software is being worked on, but Kempf said it's proving more complex than expected because the whole progam is being rewritten. Version 3.0 was released in 2018.

Question of the Fortnight

Could your Amazon Fire Stick get you arrested?

Police are targeting both users and sellers of illegal devices

The police are cracking down on illegal Amazon Fire Sticks. These are devices that criminals have modified – or 'jailbroken' – in order to stream content like Premier League football without having to pay for it.

They're not difficult to buy if you know where to look online, or who to ask locally. Many who use them think it's a minor crime posing little risk of getting caught. But that's beginning to change.

In March, a Spanish judge signed a warrant that would allow for illegal streamers to be identified. The ruling, in a commercial court in Barcelona, means that every internet provider will have to reveal the IP addresses of anyone illegally streaming La Liga – the Spanish football league. It's a significant ruling because previously only "public establishments" such as pubs could be prosecuted for illegally streaming football.

The decision only affects viewers in Spain, but it reflects the more aggressive stance that UK authorities are starting to take. The police have always targeted criminals selling illegal devices, but they're now also going after those *using* the devices.

And the problem is more widespread than you might think. A YouGov survey last November revealed that almost 1 in 10 people in the UK population have recently watched sport illegally for free.

In January 2023, police visited hundreds of homes across the UK to tell them to stop streaming illegally, warning them that they could be prosecuted. Many of these viewers were customers of Steven Mills, 58, from Shrewsbury, who earned over £1m selling illegal Fire Sticks. He was sentenced last October to two-and-a-half years behind bars.

There have been further raids and arrests across the UK this year, as the crackdown intensifies. The police have been assisted by the Premier League and Fact (Federation Against Copyright Theft).

Fact says the measures show that piracy is "treated with the utmost seriousness and decisive action will be taken against suppliers of illicit services regardless of their size or scale".

Visit Fact's news page (www.snipca.com/49766) and you'll see how determined the organisation is to tackle the problem. Almost all the stories are about illegal streaming. As public awareness grows, it's also encouraging people to report those selling illegal devices to Crimestoppers (www.snipca.com/49765).

Police are keen to dispel the myth that this is a victimless crime, saying that the money often funds wider criminal activity. They also warn that illegal devices can contain malware that exposes users to data theft and fraud.

It's not actually illegal to own a cracked Fire Stick, but you are breaking the law if you use it to bypass paid-for subscriptions, whether for sport, films or any other content.

If you're looking to buy a Fire Stick, don't be tempted by offers on eBay or Facebook Marketplace, no matter how cheap they are. You won't be able to tell by looking that the device is illegal – a hacked Fire Stick looks the same as a legitimate one. The difference is the software inside, which won't ask for a password to access any content – meaning it's all available for free.

The safest place to buy a Fire Stick is from Amazon

Unsurprisingly, the best place to buy the devices is Amazon itself. We think the Fire TV Stick Lite (£35 from www.snipca.com/49206, pictured left) is the best option for most viewers.

Also try Argos, Currys, John Lewis and supermarkets. But always steer clear of Dodgy Dave's Stick-For-A-Quid deals down the pub.

THE FACTS

- Recent police raids have led to arrests of people selling Fire Sticks that have been hacked to avoid paying for TV subscriptions
- Police say that the money earned from selling illegal devices helps to fund wider criminal activities
- Surveys show that almost 10 per cent of people in the UK have recently watched sport illegally

Protect your tech

Scams and threats to avoid, plus new security tools

WATCH OUT FOR...

Morrisons 'mystery box' emails

What's the threat?

Scammers are sending emails claiming to offer a 'mystery box' of freebies. They pretend to be from the UK's major retailers – most commonly Morrisons and other supermarkets.

One email says you're entitled to a mystery box because "you've scored in our loyalty giveaway" (1 in our screenshot). It shows a picture of a box, with the Apple logo, containing phones and laptops. Below is a red button prompting you to 'Claim Your Reward' 2.

Another email mentions Morrisons above the heading 'You've Been Chosen!' 3 and tries to tempt you with a "unique opportunity" to win a box. It has an image of an unopened Christmas box, surrounded by drones, cameras, smartwatches, monitors, laptops and other devices. To 'win' this box you have to click the 'Take Survey Now' button. Clicking any button in the emails takes you to sites that try to steal your personal details.

Credit: Action Fraud

How can you stay safe?

Scammers impersonating supermarkets is nothing new, but make a mental note that they're using mystery boxes as a common tactic at the moment. Action Fraud said that it has received nearly 8,000 reports of this scam recently (see www.snipca.com/49576).

We're not surprised that scammers are including mystery boxes in emails because similar-sounding legitimate offers have become popular. Morrisons sells 'Magic Bags' that contain £10 worth of surplus food for just £3.09 (www.snipca.com/49577), while a 'Surprise Bag' from Aldi costs £3.30. It's likely that scammers will mimic these specific deals soon.

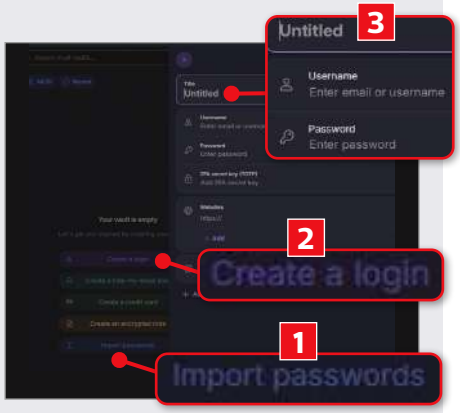
Also be on the lookout for scams that exploit the popularity of mystery boxes sold by fast-growing Chinese retailer Temu (www.temu.com) – see Protect Your Tech, Issue 676, for more information.

New tools | Proton Pass for Windows

Proton, one of our favourite security companies, has released a Windows version of its password manager, to accompany its browser extension and mobile apps. To get it, visit www.snipca.com/49574 then click the 'Download for Windows' button below the 'Access from your desktop' heading.

Next, launch it by double-clicking the 'ProtonPass_Setup' file, then log into your existing Proton account or create one. You'll see a screen saying that your vault is empty, with five options below. Click 'Import passwords' (1 in our screenshot) if you have logins to import from other password managers.

If not, click 'Create a login' 2 then enter the details of an account you want Proton to store (title, username, password etc 3). Click 'Create login' at the top right when done.



The free version of Proton Pass gives you two vaults for storing your data, and you can use it on unlimited devices that you share with up to two other people. The main benefit of the paid-for version is being able to access your vaults while your computer is offline. For prices see www.snipca.com/49579.

ScamWatch
Readers warn readers

'Kay from Microsoft' scam

'Kay has shared a file with you!' read the subject line. Ooh – thanks Kay. But I don't know anyone called Kay. The sender was 'Microsoft', which sounded reasonably plausible, but why would they send me a file out of the blue? The email address was 'onedrive@microsoftsupport.be', which sounded less plausible.

I searched online and found that '.be' is the domain for Belgium. I don't know anyone from Belgium, called Kay or otherwise. And I certainly don't know anyone employed by Microsoft. The file I was meant to open was called 'Workfolder'. I declined to click it and instead reported the email as phishing.

Phil Sutton

Warn your fellow readers about scams at letters@computeractive.co.uk

Letters

Tell us what's on your mind

I bought unsafe doorbell – it was a disaster

I wish I'd read your warning about the Chinese-made Rakeblue video doorbell before buying it (Issue 679, page 7, pictured right). I came across it in early January on Amazon and thought it seemed good value at around £40. But it's been a disastrous purchase. The battery is woeful and its connection to the internet keeps dropping. I couldn't get through to Rakeblue's customer service for help. Too late did I notice that 20 per cent of its reviews on Amazon are one star.

I was determined not to give up, but I've changed my mind having read about its security flaws in your article. I've returned it to Amazon hoping for a refund, which means I am now without a video doorbell. Please tell me there are better models to buy.

Jim Goad

CA SAYS Indeed there are, as we revealed in Issue 679's feature (page 60) on ditching Ring doorbells following its outrageous 43-per-cent price rise. There are plenty of excellent doorbells that don't require a subscription, such as TP-Link's Tapo D230S (£100 from www.snipca.com/49494) and Ezviz's DB1C (£55 from www.snipca.com/49497). If you missed Issue 679, you can buy the back issue from www.snipca.com/49591.

For the benefit of readers who missed the warning about Rakeblue, it follows research from US non-profit organisation Consumer Report, which found that several brands of doorbell made by Chinese firms Eken and Tuck lack encryption. This means they can be accessed remotely, allowing hackers to see images captured by the doorbell. As well as Rakeblue, Consumer Reports warned about the doorbells with the brand Fishbot.

I share Elon Musk's Windows dismay

I empathise with Elon Musk's dismay and anger that Microsoft makes it so hard to bypass a Microsoft account when installing Windows ('Question of the Fortnight', Issue 679). It's the kind of anticompetitive measure that the company has always excelled at. I hope Musk's high-profile shaming of Microsoft will alert the specific regulators who have the power to take on tech giants.

You gave an interesting method for installing Windows without a Microsoft account, and I'm going to try it. But I'm sure I've read another trick that involves creating a fake email address. Is that correct?

Dennis Brock

CA SAYS Yes, there is another method – as we explain in Make Windows Better on page 46.

Where is Apple's iDesiccant?

Reading about Apple's updated advice on not placing wet iPhones in uncooked rice (Issue 679, page 49), I realised that the company is missing an opportunity to sell yet another overpriced accessory. They should make their own desiccant bag designed to absorb moisture, slap the Apple logo on it, and flog it for about 100 times more than it costs to make. If they can get away with charging £299 for designer Apple Watch straps (www.snipca.com/49611), I'm sure there'll be a devoted market for a luxury iDesiccant. I'm not paying it though. I'll just make sure I never use my iPhone to wash my windows with.

Michael Moylan

Switching to 5G broadband cut my bills

I was interested to read Tony Allaway's letter regarding switching to 5G mobile broadband (Issue 678). I switched to an unlimited Smarty SIM deal (also using the 3 network) costing £16 a month for the first year (about to increase to £20 a month). This cut my monthly broadband bill by about the same amount as Tony did. My SIM is installed in a TP-Link Archer MR600 modem/router with an external antenna attached to an adjacent window by suction cups.

Unlike Tony, my signal is only 4G, but I still get average speeds of around 10Mbps – though it can vary from about 5Mbps to just over 20Mbps. I find this speed acceptable, bearing in mind the much lower cost of the service. Of course, higher speeds would be welcome and wouldn't cost me any more because the SIM and the modem/router will both work with a 5G signal.

My problem is that I've been unable to find any information about when or whether the 4G towers in my area are likely to be upgraded to 5G. Is there a website that has this information?

Donald Hall

CA SAYS There's no single website that contains this information, but you can try to work it out from a variety of sources – as we explain on page 60 in our guide on switching to mobile broadband.

Make clear who *can't* get Virgin Stream

In Issue 678 (page 8) you write that Virgin has added over 100 Freeview channels to its Stream TV service. You state that Stream is available to both new and existing customers who subscribe to the company's broadband,

What's the Issue...?

It's about time I upgraded from Office 2013. Didn't you explain all the options last year?

Eric Maynard

CA SAYS We did – in Issue 653, page 60.

Did you explain recently how to use the VPNs built into Brave and Opera?

Howard Pryer

CA SAYS In Issue 657's Cover Feature on staying invisible online.

When did you explain why text messages are inherently unsafe?

Tony Lorimer

CA SAYS In Issue 667, page 60. Read it and the features above on our 2023 Back Issue CD/Stick: www.snipca.com/49617.

which is true. But you should have clarified that Stream is not available to existing customers who already subscribe to Virgin's TV service.

I subscribe to a package that includes 1GB broadband, all free-to-air TV channels, Netflix, Sky Sports and Sky Movies. It includes a second box I have in my dining room, which I don't use that often, but for which I pay a monthly fee. I asked Virgin if I could have the second box removed and have Stream instead, but they refused. They made it absolutely clear that Virgin Stream is not available to existing customers whose package includes TV.

Mike Moody

BBC axing iPlayer downloads could be discrimination

So, having comprehensively trashed local radio using the excuse that it had to invest more in digital services, the BBC is withdrawing the ability to watch iPlayer on a PC. This affects the service that they continually plug on TV to such an extent they appear not to want anyone to watch live TV anymore. Worse still, it's sneaking the notice out on the iPlayer help page, presumably in the hope that too few will notice in time for any sort of backlash. That rather smacks of the Vogons' approach to planning notices as described in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

It could be regarded as a case of discrimination because it's probably those of us with slightly more birthdays under our belts who use a PC rather than a phone or tablet. I don't want to watch TV on a teeny-tiny phone screen. What's the point of producing grand, expansive programmes such as David Attenborough's nature documentaries just to cram them into a six-inch phone screen? Might as well go back to the 405-line resolution of old TVs, and save the expense of HD and UHD!

Nick Willcox

The iPlayer is an excellent service and the BBC is supposed to champion the value of 'inclusivity'. This unfair decision doesn't make me and my family feel included. Clearly the money men and metropolitan elite in charge of the BBC do not understand the reality of living in the UK today. I live only 12 miles from the centre of Edinburgh and have been promised broadband through some sort of fibre since 2017. We're still waiting, with no guarantee of ever being connected.

In 2020, we took advantage of the universal service obligation to move from an exceedingly slow copper-wire internet to one that's supposedly at least 10Mbps via 4G. But as we all know, 4G is unstable and download speeds are variable. For example, when local schools release their pupils, hundreds of mobiles are switched on and internet speeds plummet so internet connection is lost.

For me, the only way to watch BBC programmes online and uninterrupted is to download them to a computer. I don't have a tablet and I don't see that watching TV on a phone is practical. I understand the BBC needs to find savings, but there are many other, better ways to do that.

Peter Watson

CA SAYS We've now received more emails about this than any other subject this year, proof that readers' anger about the BBC's decision is widespread. We've responded by explaining how you can use an unofficial program to download iPlayer shows – see our Workshop on page 38.

STAR LETTER

Google Search is stuffed with intrusive adverts

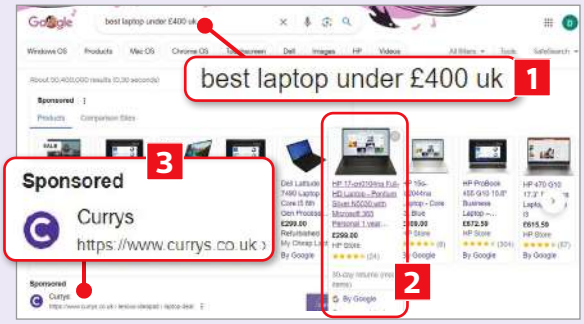
I enjoyed Issue 679's Cover Feature (pictured) on ways to make Google great again, and I'm looking forward to trying your tips on Chrome, Gmail and Maps. But I'm sceptical that any changes I make to Search will improve its results. All it shows me now are intrusive adverts.

As an example, I recently typed 'best laptop under £400 UK' (1 in our screenshot below) into Google, hoping it would take me to a site with in-depth and knowledgeable reviews. Instead, I got a 'Sponsored' box containing five laptop deals, three of which were *over* £400!

Clicking the double-arrow icon on the right stretches this box across the full width of the page, which looks horrible. Hovering over an offer makes it pop up 2, which I find distracting. Worse, I couldn't find a way to shrink this box. All you can do is scroll right and left, or scroll down to find more results – though even those are adverts, as the Currys link shows 3.

I know everyone is fed up with the hype around AI, but for general questions ChatGPT (https://chat.openai.com) gives much clearer answers, written in language the ordinary person can understand. Its buying advice is out of date – it suggested models from 2022 when I asked the laptop question. But perhaps that's a good thing. If ChatGPT started making money from people clicking adverts, then their results would become as bad as Google's.

David McKenna



CA SAYS We agree that asking ChatGPT often gives more useful and immediate answers than Google. We explain how to use it on your phone or tablet in our Cover Feature, page 50.

The **Star Letter** writer wins a **Computeractive** mug!

Consumeractive

We stand up for your legal rights

LEAD CASE

Can you help me cancel my Norton subscription?

Q A year ago, I bought a Norton subscription at the special price offered by *Computeractive* (www.snipca.com/49532, pictured). But when I recently checked my bank account Norton had taken £99 for renewing it – without telling me. I can't work out how to cancel and Norton has ignored all my emails, so can you help?

Ramalitse Sakoane

A We'll do our best. Although we work with companies such as Norton to bring discounted offers to our readers through our Software Store, we've no control over what they do after the original subscription or offer ends.

Norton should have given Ramalitse 30 days' notice of his subscription renewal, but this may have ended up in his junk or spam email folder. We've asked him to look for this. Sonny would have been allowed to cancel within 14 days of being contacted, as long as he hadn't downloaded any updates relating to the renewed subscription.

However, he might still have a case even though the 14-day deadline has passed. Ramalitse would need to prove that he tried to cancel and that Norton ignored him, or made it too difficult to do so. We'll contact Norton to point this out.

Problems like this should become rarer once the Government's Digital Markets Competition and Consumers Bill becomes law. It states that companies must make it easier to cancel rolling subscriptions, though we don't have details yet. Amendments are likely, but hopefully the Bill will become law by the end of the year. It can't come a minute too soon because it's estimated consumers lose £1.6bn each year on subscriptions they can't cancel or have forgotten about.

CASE ONGOING

I don't like my radio, so can I get a refund?

Q The RF-D15 radio that I bought from Panasonic for £40 won't let me set functions such as alarm, sleep and volume due to existing settings. Plus, it's useless as a bedside radio because the buttons are on the back, and you have to press functions multiple times to switch off the alarm. Do I have a case for a refund?

Barry Gregson-Allcott

A No, we don't think Barry has a case, though we sympathise with him. He's clearly not happy with the radio and regrets buying it, but it doesn't appear to be inherently faulty.

Barry says Panasonic hasn't been helpful and has refused a refund. But he's unlikely to persuade the company to unless he can prove the radio was faulty when he bought it, or that it doesn't match its description. If Barry had realised he didn't want the radio within 14 days of it arriving, he could have returned it for a full refund.

Nevertheless, we've asked Panasonic to consider offering Barry another radio as a replacement - one that better suits his needs. If it does so, it would be purely a goodwill gesture.

CASE ONGOING

CASE UPDATE

The mysterious case of Temu's missing refund

If you're wondering why a retailer hasn't refunded you, check whether the original payment was ever processed. That's what Sharon Styles did when chasing a refund from Chinese website Temu, discovering that the money had never actually left her account.

We first covered her case in Issue 676, when she asked whether she was due a refund because Temu hadn't hit its estimated delivery date. We updated her case in 677 to say that Temu had agreed to refund her because the items were late.

Temu said it would return her money to the bank card tied to her PayPal account. Sharon waited a couple of weeks, but no refund appeared. PayPal told us that it can take 30 days for money to arrive in accounts, but that deadline came and went.

PayPal then said that Sharon's original payment to Temu was still classed as 'pending'. This means Temu never took the money in the first place, so there was nothing to refund. Sharon then checked her bank statements and confirmed that the payment had never gone out. Despite this, Temu did end up delivering the items to Sharon, which was probably an administrative error.

Whatever happened, Temu should have been clearer with Sharon about her order. And like all retailers, it should know the difference between a refund (which returns the money to your account) and a payment reversal (which cancels the transaction, so the money never leaves your account).

Software on disc came late – what are my rights?

Q Before Christmas, I spent £159 buying Microsoft Office 2021 from Tekgia (www.tekgia.com). This was to be supplied on a disc, which didn't arrive until February. It was also missing the product key. Tekgia said I was outside the 14 days allowed to cancel for a full refund. Is that correct?

Robert Drywood

A Since first emailing us Robert has got back in touch to say that Tekgia has now sent the product key and he's activated Office. However, we're including his case because it lets us explain how the Consumer Contract Regulations (CCRs) affect software.

The law says that if you buy software online, you have 14 days in which to seek a refund – provided you haven't activated it by entering the product key. Doing this is considered 'using' the software.

But it's important to remember that Robert asked for a disc to be sent, which meant he was in effect paying for a physical product, not digital (ie, software). This means Tekgia, based in Manchester, had 30 days to deliver it. By not doing so until February, it breached his contract with Robert and he was entitled to a full refund. In the end he's happy with the purchase, despite the late delivery.

CASE CLOSED

Is Nokia responsible for faulty handset?

Q The Nokia C01 Plus phone (pictured) I bought in 2021 no longer receives texts. Thinking it was a problem with my SIM card, I went to O2 and the assistant tried the SIM in a new phone. A hard reset worked briefly, but the problem keeps reappearing. Nokia offered to fix it for £80. Should I pay it?

Raymond Dalgleish

A No, Raymond shouldn't pay this because his contract is actually with Argos, the retailer he bought the phone from. He needs to contact Argos, but before doing so he should try some of the solutions to the problem that have been suggested online (www.snipca.com/49529).

If they don't work, he should tell Argos about his problem and say that it's a well-known fault that's been discussed online. Argos may decide to refund him straight away, though it's allowed to deduct money to reflect how long he's been using the phone. It's also allowed to offer a repair or replacement, but not both if one of these fails.

However, because more than six months have passed since purchase, Argos can ask Raymond to prove that the phone is faulty. If so, he'll have to pay for the phone to be inspected, but if a fault is found Argos will have to refund the cost.

We've asked Raymond to tell us whether any of the fixes work. In the meantime we'll ask Nokia whether it knows what the problem is.

CASE ONGOING

CREDIT WHERE IT'S DUE

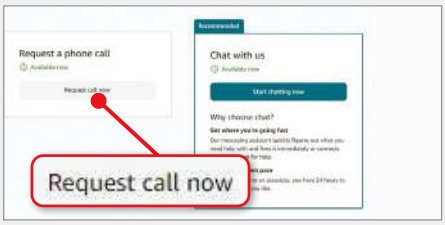
Amazon refunded film purchase within minutes

The BBC recently broadcast the film *How the West was Won*. I only caught the final 20 minutes, so I decided to buy it on Amazon Prime in HD for £7.99. The introductory credits looked fine in 1.85:1 aspect ratio, but the film then jumped to 16:9 when it started, which spoiled my viewing entertainment.

I wanted a refund, but couldn't find a way to request this. But I did find on Amazon's website a call-back option (see screenshot). To access it, visit customer services (at the link below right) then select your item.

After I explained my dilemma, the representative refunded my purchase in less than five minutes, which was impressively quick. He was also very sympathetic and polite.

John Ryan



Has a company impressed you with its customer service? Please let us know: editor@computeractive.co.uk

Contact:
Amazon

- **Amazon customer service:** www.snipca.com/49446

Grow Your Family Tree

Records for the UK's top two universities stretch back to the 1200s. Follow **Judith Batchelor's** tips to...

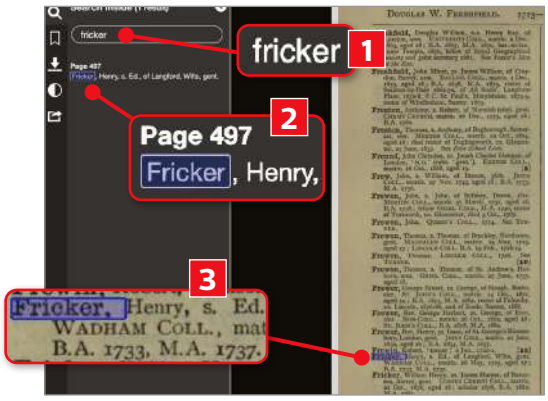
Find Oxford and Cambridge students

If your ancestor was a gentleman from the upper classes, or had a profession that required an academic education, it's likely they attended university. Before the 19th Century, this would have been Oxford or Cambridge – the only English universities at the time – or Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow or St Andrews in Scotland.

University alumni records can provide valuable information, including age of students, place of birth, previous schooling, parentage, siblings' names, degree(s) and subsequent employment or military service. Because it was common for members of a family to attend the same university, you may find entries spanning several generations.

Browse Oxford records

Joseph Foster's *Alumni Oxoniensis* was published in 1891, listing all known students and teachers at Oxford University. It consists of eight volumes – four covering 1500 to 1714, the others 1715 to 1886. This was continued in 1893 by Foster's *Oxford Men and their Colleges 1880-1892*.



Judith found her ancestor Henry Fricker by searching the *Alumni Oxoniensis* on the Internet Archive

Both records are stored on the Internet Archive, but rather than going straight there you should visit their Wikipedia page: www.snipca.com/49434. Look under the Publications heading and you'll see four links to the *Alumni Oxoniensis* by surname (A-D, E-K, L-R, S-Z). Click 'online version' next to one and you'll be taken to the Internet Archive, where you can search top left.

I clicked the E-K link and searched for 'Fricker' (1 in our screenshot left), hoping to find someone from a minor gentry family in Wiltshire who form part of my family tree. It came up with one entry on page 497 for Henry Fricker 2. Clicking to the page, I saw that he attended Wadham College, gaining a BA in 1733 and an MA four years later 3.

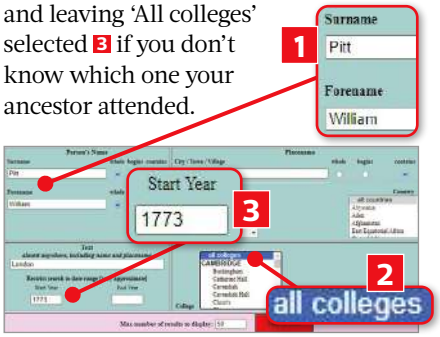
Also on that Wikipedia page is the link for *Oxford Men and their Colleges* – again, clicking 'online version' takes you to the Internet Archive.

Browse Cambridge records

It's a similar process for searching Cambridge University records, which are called *Alumni Cantabrigiensis* and cover the 1200s up to 1900. Visit Wikipedia (www.snipca.com/49403) then click one of the links under the Volumes heading. Note they're ranked by actual surname, not initial letter – so 'Abbas – Cutts' rather than 'A-C'.

Cambridge University has records based on *Alumni Cantabrigiensis* (www.snipca.com/49404) but adds female students who were admitted from 1869. Despite looking basic, it has some advanced search functions which it explains above and below.

To start though, try a simple search by typing first and surname (1 in our screenshot below), then adding dates 2 and leaving 'All colleges' selected 3 if you don't know which one your ancestor attended.



Enter a name, date, and leave 'All colleges' selected

Your Genealogy Problems Solved

My wife's ancestor Joel Cheney was a prison officer in London. He appears in the 1841 and subsequent censuses described as 'Prison Warder' or 'Turnkey at Prison', but there's no mention of which prison. How can I find this out?

Brian Hillier

Fortunately, prison staff records were kept at the time, and those for London are held by the London Metropolitan Archives (LMA, www.snipca.com/49384). You'll see what's available in their list of Prison Records (www.snipca.com/49385). Joel Cheney was living in the Farringdon/Clerkenwell area, so he may have been working at Clerkenwell Prison. There are staff records for the prison from 1847 to 1862. He appears on several occasions as a witness in the Old Bailey Proceedings between 1836 and 1840 – search at www.snipca.com/49386. During this period he was a City of London policeman (No 59). The LMA has these records too – for details see www.snipca.com/49387.

Have a genealogy question for Judith? Email letters@computeractive.co.uk with 'Grow Your Family Tree' in the subject line.

Next issue: Search WW2 Home Guard records

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Robert Irvine recommends new programs that won't cost you a thing

PASSWORD MANAGER

KeePassXC 2.7.7

www.snipca.com/49708
What you need: Windows 10 or 11, macOS or Linux

Unlike online password managers such as LastPass and Bitwarden, which store your login details on their servers, KeePassXC keeps everything on your PC, so you always have complete control over your data. It's free, with no options limited to a paid-for version, and is easier to use than the original KeePass software on which it's based.

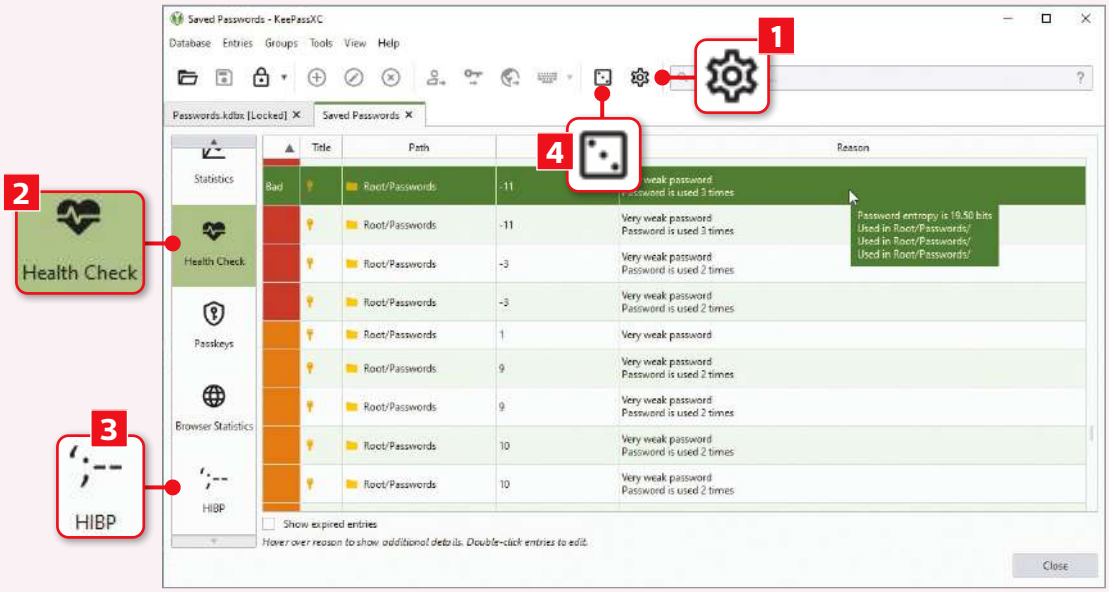
Though you wouldn't guess from the version number, KeePassXC 2.7.7 is a major update that introduces three useful features. The first is the ability to import your passwords easily from Bitwarden and 1Password.

First, export your data from Bitwarden in JSON format or from 1Password in 1PUX or OPVault format, then click the Database menu in KeePassXC and choose Import. Select the relevant password manager, click Browse to find the passwords file and choose whether to add it to a new or existing database. Click 'Continue' then Done to import the passwords.

The second addition is support for passkeys, which were the subject of our 'Stop using passwords' Cover Feature in Issue 670 (get it from www.snipca.com/49712). When you import login data that contains passkeys, you can access the details by choosing Passkeys in the Database menu. To add a passkey manually, select Import Passkey and locate the file.

If you want to save new passkeys to KeePassXC, you'll need to install its extension for Chromium browsers (www.snipca.com/49713) and Firefox (www.snipca.com/49714). Select 'Enable Passkeys' in the extension's Settings, and when you create a passkey for a website, the extension will prompt you to click Register to save it to a KeePassXC database.

The third new feature is a simplified sign-in process when you're using a USB security key such as YubiKey. KeePassXC now detects these devices automatically so you can unlock your password databases more quickly.



1 To link KeePassXC's browser extension with the desktop program (as mentioned above), click the Settings button and choose Browser Integration. Select 'Enable browser integration' and tick the browsers you want to use with KeePassXC.

2 KeePassXC's Health Check feature, which you can access by clicking Database Reports in the Database menu, uses colour-coding and health scores to highlight weak passwords such as those you've used several times and that are easy for hackers to crack.

3 To find out if any of your passwords have been compromised in data breaches, click the HIBP option followed by Perform Online Analysis. This uses the service Have I Been Pwned to check your login details – these are encrypted keep your data secure.

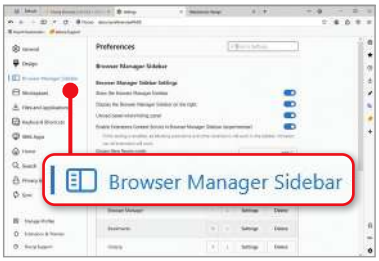
4 You can create a new secure password by clicking the dice button to open KeePassXC's Password Generator. Click the 'Copy password' button to save a generated password to your clipboard, then paste it into a password-reset page.

WEB BROWSER

Floorp 11.10

www.snipca.com/49707

What you need: Windows 10 or 11, macOS or Linux



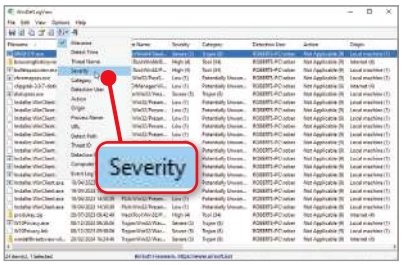
Most browsers now use the same Chromium code as Chrome, but the oddly named Floorp is based on Firefox. This means you don't need to worry about it sharing your data with Google – "we have no affiliation with any advertising companies" – and can enjoy features you won't find elsewhere. These include a fully customisable design, which lets you apply different themes, move toolbars to the bottom of the window and hide features you don't need. Floorp offers built-in protection against hidden trackers, malicious scripts and fingerprinting, and blocks dangerous downloads by default. The latest version lets you run extensions, which you can install from the Mozilla Add-ons store, in the browser's sidebar. Enable this option in the Browser Manager Sidebar settings (see screenshot above). Note that Floorp's developer is Japanese, so the browser may occasionally open pages in that language.

SECURITY TOOL

WinDefLogView 1.05

www.snipca.com/49721

What you need: Windows 10 or 11



Microsoft Defender Antivirus does a great job of protecting your PC against malware and PUPs, but if you want to see which security threats it's blocked, you need to delve into Windows Security's settings. WinDefLogView makes this information easier to find and understand by listing all the threats Defender has detected. This update adds a useful 'Sort By' option to the program's toolbar and View menu, so you can reorganise the list to prioritise the details you find most important, such as each threat's detection time, category – Trojan, for example – or severity, from Low to Severe. Click the arrow next to the Sort By option to select your preference (see screenshot above). Right-click an entry and choose Open Threat URL to look it up on Microsoft's Security Intelligence website. Ironically, WinDefLogView triggers a Microsoft Defender SmartScreen warning, but it's safe to use, so just click 'More info' then 'Run anyway'.

SHOULD I PAY FOR...?

Choose the right version of software

DisplayFusion Pro

www.snipca.com/49727

Price: From £26.82 **Free trial period:** 30 days

What you need: Windows 10 or 11

If you use more than one monitor, or a connected laptop to give you a dual display, you'll know that the options for working with multiple monitors in Windows are frustratingly basic. DisplayFusion offers a huge array of features for multi-display setups so you can make the most of all your available screen space.

The free version of the program lets you set different desktop wallpapers on each monitor using images from your own collection or online sources, or apply backgrounds with solid colours or gradients. You can make windows transparent, add extra buttons to their title bars, drag them between monitors and 'snap' them to the edges of either screen.

DisplayFusion Pro builds on these features with additional customisation options, shortcut keys for performing quick commands and the ability to create profiles for each monitor. It also has dozens of features you don't get in the free program, which more than justify its one-off cost.

For example, you can mirror a whole screen or just a selected area, add a taskbar to every desktop – with different buttons and pinned items on each one (see screenshot below) – replace the Start menus using third-party tools such as Open-Shell, show separate lock-screen images and screensavers on each monitor, and control your display remotely from your phone or tablet. See www.snipca.com/49729 to compare the Free and Pro versions.

OUR VERDICT: Pay for it

This is a rare example of a paid-for program that's worth every penny, and you can try the full version for free before upgrading. DisplayFusion also offers Pro versions for businesses, but the Standard one is ideal for home users who have more screens than PCs.

What should I download?

We advise you which software and apps to use

Can I change the colour of my folders?

Q Is there an easy way to change the colour of folders in bulk within Windows 11? For example, I'd like all my tax folders to be green to match HMRC's colour scheme. This makes things faster when I'm looking for documents to file my tax return.

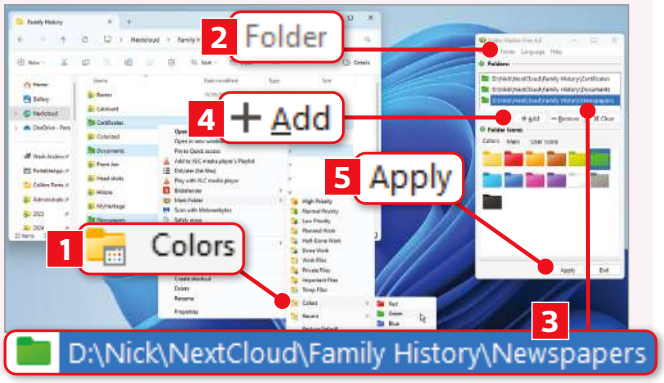
Satwant Phull

A Try Folder Marker Free (www.snipca.com/49357), which makes it easy to colour-code groups of folders in one go. Download the program, then double-click the 'FolderMarkerFree.exe' file to go through the setup instructions. Part of this adds Folder Marker options to your right-click (context) menu. When it's finished, untick 'Launch Folder Marker', click Finish, then restart your computer.

You can now colour your folders in two ways. One is to navigate to File Explorer, then hold down the Ctrl button as you click each folder you want to colour. When you've selected them all, right-click and select 'Show more options', then Mark Folder, followed by Colors (1 in our screenshot). You'll see a choice of six colours. Note that in Windows 10 you don't need to click 'Show more options'.

The second method gives you 13 colours to choose. Launch Folder Marker, then open the Folder menu 2 and select Multiple Folders. Next, pick all the folders you want to colour. Either drag the folders from File Explorer into the selection pane 3 or click the + Add 4 button to manually add them – if there are multiple folders in the same location, hold down the Ctrl key as you click each one to highlight it before clicking Select Folder.

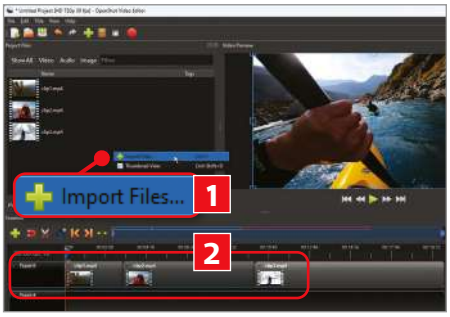
Repeat until you've added all the folders you'd like to colour. Finally, click your chosen colour from the options before clicking Apply 5 at the bottom.



Can I edit GoPro videos?

Q I want to edit some skiing videos recorded on my GoPro camera. I'd rather not pay to do this, so is there free specialist software for the job?

Duncan McCann

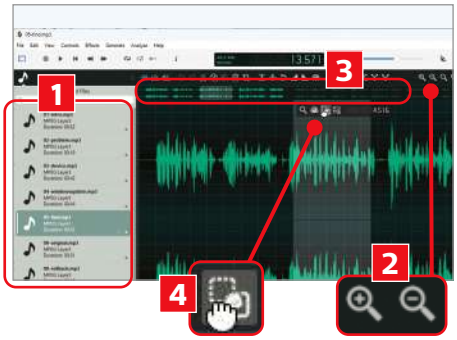


A GoPro cameras produce videos as H.264 or H.265 MP4 files. Because this is close to an industry standard format, you can edit them in almost any video-editing tool, including our current favourite OpenShot (free from www.openshot.org). Right-click inside OpenShot's Project Files box then click 'Import Files' (1 in our screenshot) and select your files – or drag them from File Explorer if you prefer. Now drag each clip on to the timeline 2. From here you can trim clips or split them into multiple sections. You can also insert transition effects between clips and add music.

Is there an easier audio-editing tool to use than Audacity?

Q I know *Computer active* loves Audacity, but I've just never got the hang of it. Is there another tool that does the same editing jobs, but is easier to use?

Louise Wynne



A Ocenaudio (www.ocenaudio.com) is the best alternative to Audacity. It has a similar design, but makes it easier to edit your recording. You can open multiple files and switch between them quickly (1 in our screenshot), and zoom in and out of your track using the magnifying-glass icons 2 while retaining an overview of the entire track 3. Another difference is that Ocenaudio displays information about the track, such as start and end points. You can also drag and drop any part of the track you select into another file you've opened 4.

Named & Shamed

Keumars Afifi-Sabet puts the boot into tech villains, jargon-spouting companies and misbehaving software

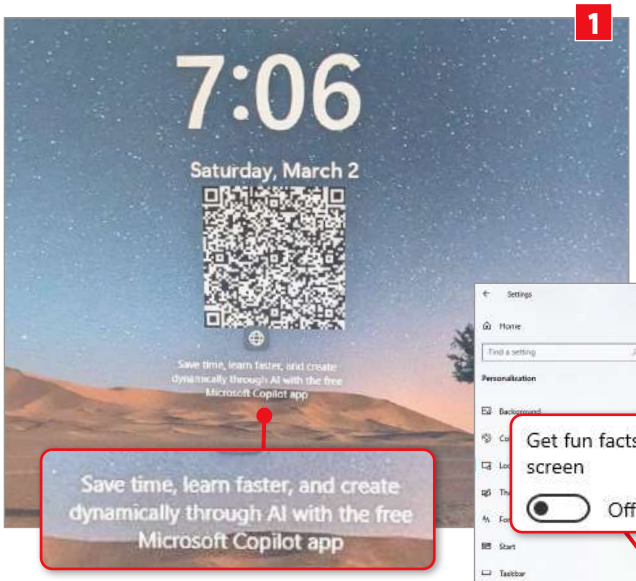
SOFTWARE WARNING!

Microsoft's QR code advert for Copilot

For years Microsoft has treated the lock screen on Windows like a digital billboard. But these ads promoting Microsoft's own products have usually been so small that you could log into your computer without really noticing them. However, what *is* impossible to ignore is a great big stonking QR code planted bang in the middle of your screen.

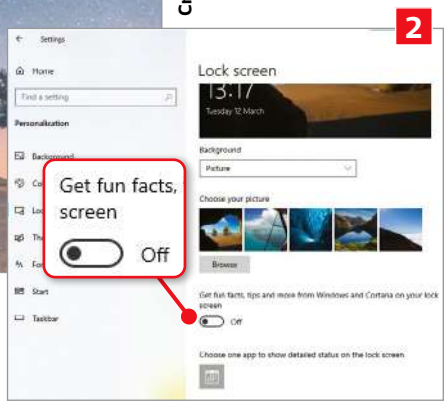
It was spotted by some users who uploaded photos to Reddit to warn others (pictured 1). Scanning the code with your phone sent you to a web page inviting you to download Microsoft's Copilot app (www.snipca.com/49683). The caption below the code suggested this, but you had to look closely to see that the message referred to the code.

Microsoft has a reputation for squeezing 'experimental' adverts into every nook and cranny of Windows. There's usually a backlash that forces the company to remove the ad, and so it proved once again. "The notification was simply a way to educate users and has since been paused," it said.



1 Microsoft stuck this QR code promoting Copilot on Windows lock screens

Credit: Reddit



2 Here's a 'fun fact' Microsoft: we don't like QR codes on our lock screen

Well, we like to 'educate' users too, so here's how to prevent further junk from appearing on your lock screen. Open Settings (press Windows key+I), then click Personalisation. Click 'Lock screen' then, in Windows 10, turn off the slider next to 'Get fun facts...' (see screenshot 2). In Windows 11 you need to untick a box.

And as a bonus tip, don't bother with the Copilot app. Use ChatGPT instead, as Robert Irvine recommends on page 53. It's cleaner, easier to use, and actually tells you what you want.

WHAT ARE THEY TALKING ABOUT?

WHAT THEY SAY

Jason Zander, Microsoft

www.snipca.com/49607

"Operators can now leverage cloud services that are adaptive, purpose-built for telecommunications and span from near edge on-premises environments to the far edges of Earth and space to monetize investments, modernize networks, elevate customer experiences and streamline business operations with AI."

WHAT THEY MEAN

I need to leverage AI to streamline my sentences.

KEUMARS' VILLAIN OF THE FORTNIGHT

Garard Ndela

Top marks to judge Amanda Rippon, who called Garard Ndela (pictured) a "self-entitled idiot" for attempting to scare people at Newcastle Airport by claiming he had a bomb.

Ndela, 20, from Gateshead, was filmed by accomplice Andre Antonio shouting something in Arabic in the hope of being mistaken for an Islamist terrorist. He thought this would make a 'hilarious' prank video on YouTube, but passengers ignored him and both he and Antonio ended up pleading guilty to communicating false information at Newcastle Crown Court.

Rippon sentenced him to nine months, suspended for two years, with 200 hours unpaid work. Antonio, 21, from Newcastle, got five months, suspended for two years, with 150 hours unpaid work. We doubt either will be videoing their punishment for YouTube 'likes'.

Credit: Northumbria Police

PC | **£759** from PCSpecialist www.snipca.com/49711

PCSpecialist Fusion Elite P

Work the room

The AMD Ryzen 5 8600G processor was only announced in January at the CES 2024 tech show, but PCSpecialist has already built an affordable desktop PC around it. The 8600G isn't at the top of the range of AMD's new processors, but it's not far behind. It offers a sensible balance between price and performance and we expect to see it appearing in many more PCs in the near future.

> "Chunky PC offers space for future improvements"

This model uses the processor's built-in Radeon 760M graphics hardware, so doesn't come with a separate graphics card. However, there is a spare PCIe x16 slot that's designed to hold a graphics card if you think you might need one at a later date.

As it stands, it's interesting to compare this brand new processor to the one in our current favourite desktop PC – Palicomp's AMD Cobra, which we reviewed in Issue 643 (see page 30). The Cobra costs just £400, significantly less than the Fusion Elite P, but is a similar offering, using the built-in graphics power of its processor, rather than a standalone card.

The Cobra's processor is an AMD Ryzen 7 5700G, so is getting on a bit now – being three generations behind this latest model. However, given the £359 difference, it still compares remarkably well.

For example, in benchmark tests that challenge the raw power of the processor, single-core performance is pretty much in line with the price difference, with the Cobra running 43-per-cent slower than the Fusion Elite P. Start working multiple cores, however, and the difference in speed shrinks to 30 per cent.

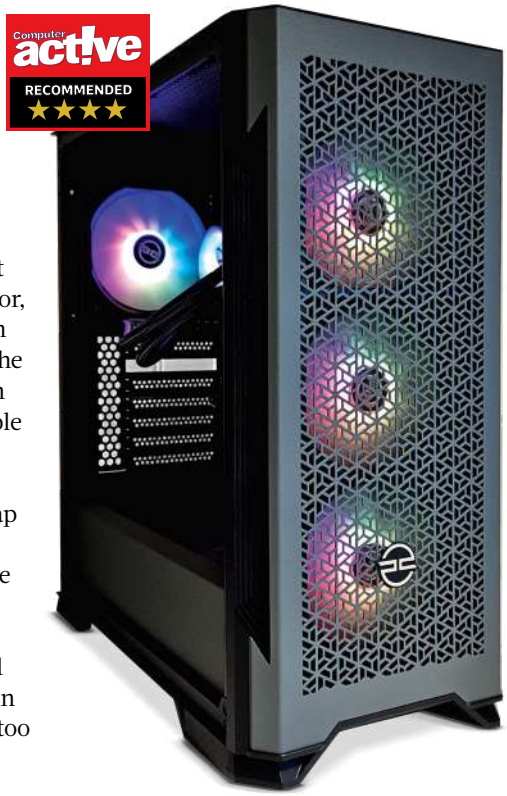
In Windows tests the performance gap narrows even further, with the Cobra running seven-per-cent slower than the Elite P. For a much cheaper PC, that's an impressive outcome.

If you want to run games, you'll need to stick to a 1080p resolution and refrain from turning the graphical settings up too high. When tested this, we saw frame rates averaging 41 frames per second (fps), which is a significant improvement on the 26fps we saw on the Cobra, but nothing to get too excited about.

PCSpecialist's Prism case is unobtrusive. The front three fans include RGB lighting which you can configure (or switch off) using supplied software. The case is roomy, leaving plenty of empty space for upgrades, but this does mean you'll need to find space on or below your desk for a chunky box that's 403mm tall and 477mm deep.

Alongside 3.5mm audio jacks for a mic and headphone, there are two USB 3.0 ports on the top for easy access. On the rear panel you'll find four more USB 3.0 and two USB 2.0 ports. There are no USB-C ports at all.

HDMI and VGA ports cover your video-output requirements, and the Ethernet socket is a single Gigabit version, not 2.5Gb. You'll need it, too, because PCSpecialist hasn't included a Wi-Fi card, though it can be added reasonably cheaply with a USB dongle.



SPECIFICATIONS
Six-core AMD Ryzen 5 8600G processor • 16GB RAM • Radeon 760M graphics • 1TB SSD • Gigabit Ethernet • 1x HDMI port • 1x VGA port • 6x USB 3.0 ports • 2x USB 2.0 ports • Windows 11 Home • 403x217x477mm (HxWxD) • Three-year warranty www.snipca.com/49711

VERDICT A decent, hefty desktop PC that provides plenty of room for future upgrades

★★★★☆

ALTERNATIVE Palicomp AMD Cobra £400
Significantly cheaper with surprisingly good performance in Windows

LAPTOP | **£1,699** from Currys www.snipca.com/49549

Samsung Galaxy Book4 Pro

Lap of luxury

As you might expect from its price, the 16in Galaxy Book4 Pro is one of the slickest laptops around, measuring just 12.5mm in thickness (when closed) and weighing only 1.6kg. Despite its lean design, Samsung has squeezed in an ample selection of ports, with two Thunderbolt 4 USB-C ports on the left, along with an HDMI socket that can support an 8K screen at 60Hz. On the right you'll find a USB 3.0 port, microSD card slot and a 3.5mm headphone jack (all pictured below). The built-in Wi-Fi 6E guarantees nippy network coverage.

> "A slick design with a fine keyboard, a long battery life and an outstanding screen"

The keyboard makes use of the extra space by including a number pad, which makes perfect sense given its width, but Samsung has positioned this to the left, spoiling what is otherwise a symmetrical design.

The keyboard is one of the best you'll find on a laptop. The keys don't travel far, but they're dampened, quiet and well spaced. Our only gripe is the use of half-height cursor keys that double up on the functions rather than separate Pg Up, Pg Dn, Home and End buttons (although these are present in the number pad).

The touchscreen is an AMOLED panel, with a resolution of 2880x1800 pixels and a slick refresh rate of 120Hz. In its default mode it covers an outstanding 98 per cent of the DCI-P3 colour standard and has a peak brightness of 398cd/m². That makes visibility good enough for almost any lighting conditions and is further helped by its anti-reflective finish.

Performance comes from the Intel Core Ultra 7 155H processor, paired with 16GB of RAM and a 512GB SSD. That's the same processor you'll find in our current favourite laptop, the Acer Swift Go 14 (£899 from www.snipca.com/49551, reviewed in Issue 677 – see page 30).

Not surprisingly, their respective performance levels are similar, though in our benchmark tests the Swift Go had the edge, while the Book4 Pro was marginally better at graphically intensive tasks, such as gaming. There's very little in it, though.

The Book4 Pro's larger design provides more room for a bigger battery, and it lasted an impressive 12 hours 19 minutes in our tests, compared with nearly 10 hours. That's quite a difference, but at £700 more you are paying a fair amount for that larger screen and longer running time.

SPECIFICATIONS

Sixteen-core Intel Core Ultra 7 155H processor • 16GB RAM • Intel Arc graphics • 16in 2880x1800-pixel screen • 512GB SSD • 2x USB-C ports • 1x USB 3.0 port • 1x HDMI port • Wi-Fi 6E • Windows 11 Home • 12.5x355x250mm (HxWxD) • 1.6kg • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/49549

RIGHT EDGE

LEFT EDGE

HOW WE TEST

Computeractive is owned by Future PLC, which employs a team of specialist technical reviewers. You'll often read references to our benchmark testing, which is a method of assessing products using the same criteria. For example, we test the speed of every PC and the battery life of every phone and tablet in exactly the same way. This makes our reviews authoritative, rigorous and accurate.

Future PLC also owns the magazines *Maximum PC*, *PC Pro* and *T3*, and the websites Laptop Mag (www.laptopmag.com), TechRadar (www.techradar.com) and Windows Central (www.windowscentral.com). This means we can test thousands of products before choosing the most relevant for *Computeractive*.

FAIR AND IMPARTIAL

Our writers follow strict guidelines to ensure the reviews are fair and impartial. The manufacturer has no involvement in our tests.

OUR AWARDS

Computer active BUY IT! ★★★★★ We award every product that gets five stars our Buy It! stamp of approval. It means we were extremely impressed by the product, and we think you will be too.

Computer active RECOMMENDED ★★★★ Every product that gets a four-star review is given the Recommended award. We highly recommend these products, although they just fail to meet the high standard of our Buy It! winners.

PRICES

Our reviews contain a link to the best price we found online at the time of press.

VERDICT A beautifully crafted laptop with performance to match its looks, but it comes at a hefty price

★★★★☆

ALTERNATIVE Acer Swift Go 14 £899 Similar performance from the same processor, but the smaller screen and shorter battery life make it significantly cheaper

LAPTOP | **£349** from www.snipca.com/49572

Lenovo IdeaPad Slim 3i Chromebook 14

Slick and thin

Like most things in life, one general rule when buying a laptop is that the less you spend on it, the more compromises you should expect. We experienced such trade-offs recently when testing the IdeaPad Slim 3i 15 (£459 from www.snipca.com/49046, reviewed in Issue 677) – an affordable Windows laptop in the same range.

This slightly smaller machine runs Google's ChromeOS instead and is even cheaper (available from Argos at the time of writing for £349). Despite this low price, however, it offers reasonably good specifications, a screen that's better than the average budget laptop, and longer battery life than most.

> "It's cheap and small but runs ChromeOS surprisingly well"

This is small by the standards of your typical 14in laptop, measuring just 324x216mm (WxD) and 19.3mm at its thickest point (when closed). Weighing just 1.5kg, it's easy to take with you when you're out and about. Only the lid is aluminium, but there's barely any flex or give anywhere on what is otherwise a plastic chassis. There's no noise when you work, not even when it's pushed to the limit with more demanding apps.

Connectivity is slightly disappointing. There's only one USB-C port on the left-hand edge, along with two USB 3.0 sockets – one on either side. Also, the one USB-C port is needed for charging, which is annoying. On the plus side, it has an HDMI socket for easy connection to a monitor, and up-to-date wireless standards – Wi-Fi 6E and Bluetooth 5.1 – built in.

The keyboard layout makes the most of the limited space and the keys are fairly comfortable to type on, though there was inconsistency across the board, with some keys feeling tighter and offering a little more 'click' than others. There are some nice touches, though, including backlighting, which you wouldn't normally find on a laptop this cheap. The touchpad is small, measuring just 105x62mm, which doesn't provide much room for manoeuvre.

The Chromebook 14's screen exceeded our expectations, and it's better than the larger screen on Lenovo's 15in Windows IdeaPad. The company claims a 300cd/m² maximum brightness level, but in our tests it actually peaked at 329cd/m². And while its colour palette can't match top-of-the-range models, its sRGB coverage of 61 per cent means image quality remains high.

Lenovo has built the Chromebook 14 around Intel's Core i3-N305 processor. Unlike other Core i3 chips this is an eight-core model, but these are all Efficiency cores rather than the Performance ones you'd see on even the basic Core i3-1305U.

In tests designed to seriously test the processor, it could only muster around 42 per cent of the performance level of the Windows version, which has an Intel Core i7-1315U. For further comparison, this is around 55 per cent of the Acer Chromebook Plus 515 (only £50 more expensive at £399 from Currys at www.snipca.com/48421, reviewed in Issue 673).

This is something to think about if you intend to run a lot of Android or Linux apps on your Chromebook, but it won't be a deal-breaker if you plan to use web-based apps. With 8GB of RAM, the N305 processor is perfectly capable of handling a couple of browser windows with a dozen tabs open in each. It will even run all your Google productivity apps in separate windows while cutting and pasting text and images between them. It's slower than more powerful Chromebooks, but it doesn't actually feel that sluggish in general use.

One upside of having those efficiency cores is extended battery life. Playing 1080p video on a loop with the screen brightness set to 170cd/m², the Chromebook 14 kept going for 11 hours 37 minutes. The Acer Chromebook Plus 515, by comparison, didn't make it to nine hours in the same test.

SPECIFICATIONS

Eight-core Intel Core i3-N305 processor • 8GB RAM • 14in 2880x1800-pixel resolution OLED touchscreen • 128GB SSD • Wi-Fi 6E • Bluetooth 5.1 • 1x USB-C port • 2x USB 3 ports • 1x HDMI port • 1x 3.5mm audio jack • ChromeOS • 19.3x342x216mm (HxWxD) • 1.5kg • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/49572

VERDICT A good-value laptop that lacks the power of Windows rivals, but it runs ChromeOS surprisingly smoothly

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE

Acer Chromebook Plus 515 £399

Slightly more expensive and runs ChromeOS faster, but the screen isn't as good

PRINTER | **£55** from Amazon www.snipca.com/49652

HP DeskJet 2710e

Small print

Printers don't get much more simplistic than the HP DeskJet 2710e. It's designed to be a light-use home-office machine with all the bells and whistles left off. What remains is a no-fuss, no-frills machine that's ideal for anyone who prints between 50 and 100 pages a month.

> "A small, basic model that's slow and yields poor-quality prints"

Its compact design is a big part of the appeal. At just 154x425x304mm (HxWxD), it can fit in a corner or cubby hole, and is one of the smallest printers we've seen for a while.

It's simple to set up with software you install on your PC or via a smartphone app. The idea is that you turn the printer on, install the two cartridges, and add the printer to your Wi-Fi network. If you prefer you can connect it via a USB port, but if you don't set up the network you won't be eligible for online benefits such as the free six-month ink subscription.

The printer is no speed demon. Our 24-page mono document took nearly 19 seconds to start, then printed at a rate of 9.9 pages per minute (ppm). Colour documents took 50 seconds to start, then were churned out at a rate of 5.7ppm. This is about as slow as printers get.

Print quality is fine for the price, but nothing special. In Better and Best quality modes you get sharp black text, but the definition isn't as fine or as consistent as you'll find in more expensive HP models, such as the HP Envy Inspire 7920e (£139 from Amazon at www.snipca.com/42478, reviewed in Issue 636). Colour business graphics are punchy, but you can see slight signs of banding and dithering on gradients. It can print photos but they're not good enough for framing.

Cheap printers have a reputation for using expensive cartridges and that's certainly the case here. HP's best-value XL cartridges cost £21 for black and £19 for colour, but only produce 240 pages and 200 pages respectively. That is almost 9p per black-and-white page, and 9.5p per colour page. You can reduce this expenditure with an ink subscription, where the cheapest option costs £2.99 a month for 50 pages (6p per page). However, keep in mind that you pay the subscription whether you print or not, and will be charged extra if you print more pages than you've committed to.

If that doesn't suit you, consider paying more up front for an ink-tank printer that's cheaper to run. The Epson EcoTank ET-2830 (£230 from John Lewis at www.snipca.com/48962), for example, prints for less than 0.5p per page.

SPECIFICATIONS

3-in-1 printer, copier and scanner • Tri-colour and black ink cartridges included • 60-sheet paper capacity • 1200x1200dpi print quality • 1200x1200dpi scan quality • USB or Wi-Fi connection • 154x425x304mm (HxWxD) • 3.42kg • Two-year warranty www.snipca.com/49652

VERDICT An extremely cheap printer, but its print speeds are slow, quality is so-so, and ongoing print costs are high

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Epson EcoTank ET-2830 £230 Much more expensive to buy, but this ink-tank model prints at a fraction of the price

CHOOSE THE RIGHT SPECS

Curved screens

What does it do?

Flat-screen monitors have been popular for years, taking over from the bulky cathode-ray tube models from the 1980s and 1990s. However, large screens aren't necessarily your best option, particularly if you sit directly in front of one. Curving the screen gently towards the user at each side can make the screen more comfortable to work on, improving what you see at the periphery of your vision, reducing reflections, making games and movies more immersive and reducing eye strain.

How does it work?

Curved screens work in the same way as regular screens, except that all the components are constructed on a curve, requiring a more complicated manufacturing process that makes them more expensive. The HP Omen 34in curved monitor (pictured), for example, costs £399 from Argos (www.snipca.com/49654).

What are the specs?

When you're buying a curved monitor, the specification to look out for is the radius – often referred to as 'R'. The HP monitor, for instance, has an 'R' value of 1500. While the curve of a typical screen is only a section of the circumference of a circle (known mathematically as an arc), the R or radius is the distance from any point of the monitor's curve to the centre of that theoretical circle. It's measured in millimetres (mm), though the unit is rarely quoted. Monitors with less extreme curves would make a larger circle, so have a higher 'R' value, while tightly curved monitors have a lower value.

Can I change it later?

No. Curved screens can't be adjusted later.

NAS DRIVE | **£209** from Synology www.snipca.com/49623

Synology BeeStation 4TB

Send backup!

Synology has been making network-attached storage (NAS) drives for years, but while these devices are easy to set up and have superb user interfaces, they can do a whole host of complicated tasks that many people probably don't need.

> "A storage drive that lets you access your files via the web, but has limited functionality"

The BeeStation is a simpler network-attached drive, closer in function to the Synology BeeDrive backup SSD that we reviewed in Issue 678 (£130 from www.snipca.com/49238). While the BeeDrive is a portable unit that's small enough to carry around in your pocket, the BeeStation stays at home.

It's connected to your network and can provide backup for all your devices, but can also share your files over your home network and online via the 'cloud', meaning you can access your files and collection of personal photos from anywhere on any device. This lets you avoid having to pay a subscription to store them on online-storage services such as Google Drive and Google Photos.

There are a few key differences between this model and previous Synology offerings. First, it comes with a 4TB hard drive installed – previously most Synology NAS drives required you to buy and fit your own, which isn't a difficult process but may have put some off.

Also, the BeeStation won't work as a media server, so you can't use it to store and access your digitised collection of films and music, for example. It really is more of a backup drive that happens to be accessible over Wi-Fi.

The web portal and the supplied software are simple to use, and include a desktop tool that will run backups automatically. You can then access the files via the web, with separate tools for photos and files. The photo tool lets you create albums and organise photos, while the file-management tool lets you arrange files into folders.

The problem is that the software is too basic and restrictive for anyone expecting more from their NAS device. We prefer the Synology BeeDrive, which is more expensive (£312) for the 4TB model, but offers much faster transfer rates and is better at what it does.

SPECIFICATIONS

Four-core Realtek 1619B processor • 1GB RAM • 4TB 5400RPM SATA hard drive • 1x USB-C port • 1x USB 3.0 port • 1x Gigabit Ethernet port • 148x63x196mm (HxWxD) • 820g • Three-year warranty
www.snipca.com/49623

VERDICT A backup drive that offers access to your files and photos via the web, but its software is too basic and it can't work as a media server

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE

Synology BeeDrive £130 A portable SSD backup drive that doesn't connect to the web but is faster and does its job better

WHAT SHOULD I BUY? We solve your buying dilemmas

Can you suggest a new PC and monitor for under £500?

Q I'm 77 and need to buy a new computer (and monitor), but I don't know where the best place is to buy one. I don't stream sport or anything on my PC, but I'd like one that's fast and versatile. I don't want to spend more than £500 in total.

John Sargent

A The best sub-£500 PC we've reviewed of late is the Palicomp AMD Cobra (£400 from www.snipca.com/43515, pictured – see page 30). We know from emails that many readers have bought this PC and have been very happy with it, and it's been our favourite desktop PC for a while. It doesn't have a graphics card so isn't ideal for games, but runs Windows brilliantly and should suit your purposes well.

It doesn't come with a monitor, but with £100 left in your budget, you can shop around for a good deal. We like the Acer KA222Q E3 (£75 from Argos at www.snipca.com/49627).

It has a 21.5in screen, so is a reasonable size, but it won't take up too much desk space. It offers few extra features, but delivers sharp details at 1080p resolution and a decent maximum brightness level (250cd/m²). It should be ideal for your needs.

Do you need advice on what you should buy? Email us at letters@computeractive.co.uk

Brother EcoPro – printer ink on demand, done right

If you're wary of printer-ink subscriptions, that's understandable. The terms and conditions can be confusing, and as we warned in Issue 676 (page 62), some manufacturers have recently been jacking up their monthly prices.

But it doesn't have to be that way. Having tried all the different subscription options, we can wholeheartedly recommend Brother EcoPro. It works with more than 50 Brother inkjet and laser printers – see the full list on Brother's website (www.snipca.com/49685) – and ensures that you'll always have the ink or toner you need, delivered to your door free of charge.

We know what you're thinking: 'I don't print enough to need a subscription'. But even for light users, Brother EcoPro can be a smart investment. The basic plan lets you print up to 50 inkjet pages a month for £2.99, while for a mono laser it's just £1.99 – and if you don't use the whole allocation then you can roll over up to 100 pages from month to month. That means you're covered for the odd occasion when you want to print a big document or a set of handouts.

Even if you go beyond your rollover pages, Brother EcoPro is great value. Additional prints are charged at a market-beating 89p for every 10 pages, so you know you're not being ripped off.

There are also plans for heavier users. The Occasional use plan costs £4.49 a month for inkjet printers or £2.99 for mono lasers, and covers 100 pages, with a 200-page rollover allowance. The Moderate and Everyday plans offer a monthly allowance of 300 and 500 pages respectively – enough for a small office.

Replacement cartridges on your doorstep

As well as ensuring you're not caught out by empty cartridges, Brother EcoPro means you never have to worry about finding new supplies. The Brother mobile app automatically monitors your printer's ink levels and ensures that new cartridges are on your doorstep before you need them (as pictured below).

Disposing of the old ones is made simple too. Brother provides a free shipping label that you can use to return your used cartridges to the manufacturer, where they're refilled or recycled. Nothing goes to landfill, so it's the most environmentally friendly way to keep your printer running.

Furthermore, there's no lock-in and no minimum subscription term. If you try it for a few months and decide it's not working out for you, you can cancel at any time and go back to using regular cartridges. Or, if your needs change, you can change subscription tiers on a month-by-month basis. It's the most flexible ink-subscription service on the market.

Get the ink or toner you need, delivered to your door free of charge

Full warranty for entire subscription

And there's one final big advantage of EcoPro, setting Brother apart from rival printer providers. No matter how old your printer is, Brother provides full warranty coverage for the duration of your EcoPro subscription. That adds extra reassurance that you'll be able to print when you need to – and if your printer's regular warranty has expired, it could save you a significant amount of money in the event of a failure.

Six months* printing – 100% FREE!

Brother is currently offering an incredible deal on EcoPro subscriptions* – so you can try any tier for a full six months without paying a penny. That means you can print hundreds of pages for free, and benefit from the extended warranty too. To get started, simply visit www.brother.co.uk/ecopro and sign up to any plan.

*Six months on EcoPro-ready products; two months on standard products

KEYBOARD | **£36** from Amazon www.snipca.com/49589

Keychron C3 Pro

True to type

Mechanical keyboards are usually considered an expensive luxury with physical switches under every key that cost a lot more to produce than the digital membranes that sit below more affordable keyboards. Here, however, Keychron has produced a decent one for a very reasonable price.

This is no mean feat because it retains many of the best features you'd expect from more expensive models. It has an impressive 1,000Hz polling rate (how frequently the keys send data to the PC they're connected to – particularly important for gamers), the ability to customise keys using the supplied software, and backlighting. That lighting is only red, but there are plenty of options that let you adapt how it displays.

The keyboard can be positioned at three angles for maximum comfort, and the key caps are curved and comfortable to type on. In fact, using this keyboard is a real pleasure. Key strokes feel springy, tactile and responsive. Underneath each switch there's additional foam padding, which dampens the typical clicking you get on a mechanical keyboard, so this is a great choice if you tend to work with other people around you.

Our only real complaint is that the USB-C port for connecting to your computer is in the centre of the rear of the keyboard. If you, like us, tend to use the space between your keyboard and monitor for storing papers and other items, the cable is likely to get in the way.

SPECIFICATIONS
87 keys • No number pad • 4-, 6-, and 8.7-degree typing angles • USB-C connection • ABS plastic construction • 31.8x365x138mm (HxWxD) • 912g • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/49589

VERDICT An affordable mechanical keyboard with few compromises

★★★★☆

ALTERNATIVE Cherry KC 200 MX £81 A high-quality, full-sized mechanical keyboard if you can't live without a number pad

HEADPHONES | **£70** from Amazon www.snipca.com/49590

OneOdio A10

Squash racket

These splendid headphones from Chinese firm OneOdio are both affordable and packed with features. They offer high-fidelity audio, a long-lasting battery, and perform well above the level you might expect from their sub-£100 price tag.

External control buttons on the right earcup are used to control volume, power and Bluetooth pairing, while the left button offers a single tap to activate the noise-cancelling option.

You can connect them wirelessly or if you prefer via cables, with a classic 3.5mm headphone jack or USB-C port to choose from. Three cables are included, for the headphone jack, USB-C-to-USB-C, and USB-C-to-USB-A. The A10 set have a surprisingly sturdy build and sit comfortably on your head.

The 40mm dynamic speaker drivers pack a punch that'll have you feeling the bass without distortion. High notes are crisp and clear, with vocals really shining in every song we listened to.

The noise-cancelling feature works well, particularly when filtering out low-frequency noise such as vehicle engines. If you need to switch back into the real world there's a transparency mode that lets background noise seep through while your music continues to play. All it's lacking is its own equaliser software, so you can't fine-tune the audio to suit your taste.

Noise-cancelling tends to take its toll on battery life, but the A10 handles this well. In our tests we managed 35 hours with noise-cancelling switched on; turning it off increased this to a whopping 45 hours.

SPECIFICATIONS
40mm drivers • 45-hour battery life • 5-minute burst charge for 2 hours listening • 196x169x85mm • 295g • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/49590

VERDICT Good-quality, noise-cancelling headphones for a surprisingly low price

★★★★☆

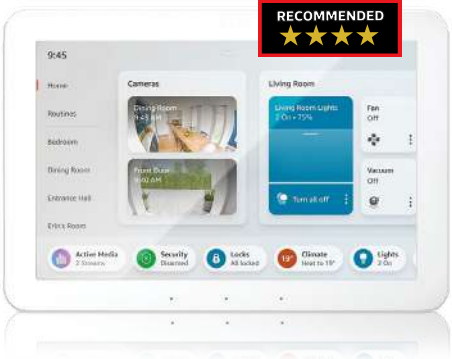
ALTERNATIVE
Sony WH-CH520 £45 If you don't need noise-cancelling, these excellent headphones are even cheaper

SMARTSCREEN | From **£170** from Amazon www.snipca.com/49664

Amazon Echo Hub

Controlling influence

Computer active RECOMMENDED ★★★★



Amazon has been refining its smart-home products for some time and now offers a comprehensive range of devices, from its Ring smart doorbells and own-brand smart plugs to the smart speakers and screens you use to control them. Until now, however, you couldn't always rely on Amazon's voice-controlled Echo devices to work with non-Amazon products. The Echo Hub is a new unifying device that changes that, connecting with devices from all the key smart-home standards, including Matter, Thread, Zigbee and Bluetooth.

> "A dedicated control panel for all your smart-home devices"

The device looks similar to the Echo Show 8 (£150 from www.snipca.com/49665). However, instead of having a large speaker that doubles as a stand, the Echo Hub is designed to hang on a wall, from where it's easily accessible for controlling your smart devices.

If you also want to listen to music and watch videos, the Echo Show remains a better option. But the Hub uses a faster processor and a more sophisticated operating system that makes it more of a control panel.

While you can still use the Alexa voice control to operate it, having everything at your fingertips on its 8in 1280x800-pixel screen is incredibly handy, offering quick and simple access to individual devices and Alexa routines.

On the left of the screen you'll see the navigation menu, which lets you switch between the main dashboard, your routines, and whatever rooms you have set up in the Alexa app on your phone or tablet. If you use security cameras in and around your home, for example, you can also use the Hub to check in on your live feeds, viewing up to four at once via its Multiview feature.

On the back is a single USB-C port. Unfortunately, it doesn't have a chargeable battery and while the cable is discreet, it'll still have to run down the wall to a plug socket, unless you can use your DIY skills to hide it.

SPECIFICATIONS

Six-core MediaTek MT8169A processor • 8in 1280x800-pixel touchscreen • Alexa-compatible • Wi-Fi 5 • Bluetooth • Supports Wi-Fi, Bluetooth Low Energy Mesh, Zigbee, Thread and Matter smart-home standards • 137x202x15mm (HxWxD) • 365g • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/49664

VERDICT A comprehensive screen for taking control of your smart-home devices, but it isn't as versatile for entertainment as the Echo Show

★★★★☆

ALTERNATIVE Amazon Echo Show 8 £150 Smaller, cheaper and better suited for music and videos, though it's also capable of controling smart devices

DO I REALLY NEED...

An AI-powered webcam?

What is it?

Logitech has launched a new webcam, called the MX Brio 4K (£220 from Amazon at www.snipca.com/49674, pictured), which uses AI to improve image quality – particularly of faces.

What does it do?

While most webcams automatically adjust brightness and contrast, Logitech claims this is better at detecting your face and the lighting conditions around it. This helps it keep your face in sharp focus and well lit, even if lighting conditions change.

What's the catch?

It uses cutting-edge technology and so is one of Logitech's most expensive webcams.

So can I do without it?

Yes. If you use your webcam a lot in poorly lit conditions, it makes more sense to buy yourself a light designed to illuminate your face, such as this £17 model: www.snipca.com/49690.

NEXT ISSUE

On Sale Weds 10 April

Minisforum Neptune HX100G
Is this the most powerful mini PC we've ever tested?

HP 27-cr0014na Full-HD All-in-One
An attractive all-in-one PC that won't break the bank

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Buy It

Find out which other products we liked. Buy our 2023 **Back Issue CD**: £18 from **www.snipca.com/48860**

Our pick of products that have won the Buy It award

LAPTOP

Acer Swift Go 14
£1,099 from www.snipca.com/49733
Tested Issue 677

With the 32GB Swift Go (£1,300) out of stock, we're recommending the 16GB model instead. It's great value and has one of Intel's Ultra processors, making it the fastest laptop we've tested. Has an OLED 14in screen and 1TB SSD.

ALTERNATIVE Honor MagicBook X 16 2023 Has a 16in screen and is good value, though nowhere near as fast. £700 from www.snipca.com/47868

DESKTOP PC

Palicomp AMD Cobra
£400 from www.snipca.com/43515
Tested Issue 643

This fast PC is a mouth-watering bargain, with 16GB of RAM, a 1TB SSD and a six-core processor – though it lacks USB-C ports and built-in Wi-Fi.

ALTERNATIVE Wired2Fire Ultima WS Home Office Workstation Blisteringly fast PC, powered by an overclocked eight-core processor and 1TB SSD. £656 from www.snipca.com/41500

APPLE iPAD

Apple iPad 10.2in
£319 from www.snipca.com/48634
Tested Issue 623

The 9th-generation of the basic iPad, released in 2021, is now the best-value Apple tablet. The 2022 version looks better and has a faster processor, but it's not worth paying £130 extra for.

ALTERNATIVE iPad Mini With an even better, but smaller, screen than the 10.2in iPad, the Mini also supports the Pencil and has 64GB of storage. £569 from www.snipca.com/33050

ANDROID TABLET

Samsung Galaxy Tab S9
£799 from www.snipca.com/49029
Tested Issue 667

With a much brighter screen than our previous favourite – the Galaxy Tab S8 – this is perfect for watching TV. It also has a faster processor, so tasks feel smoother, even with several windows open. £799 will get you the 128GB version. If you want 256GB you'll need to spend £100 more.

ALTERNATIVE Lenovo Tab P11 Pro It's slower than the Tab S9 and the screen is duller, but has a detachable keyboard so you can use it as a laptop. £430 from www.snipca.com/45244

APPLE iPHONE

Apple iPhone 13
£599 from www.snipca.com/43498
Tested Issue 627

Now £200 cheaper than its 2021 launch price, the iPhone 13 has a superb screen, long battery life and an excellent camera – particularly for taking quick snaps without blurring. You could pay £799 for the newer iPhone 15, but we're not convinced it's worth the extra money.

ALTERNATIVE iPhone SE With a single camera and smaller screen but the same powerful A15 processor and 64GB storage as the iPhone 14, it's great value. £429 from www.snipca.com/34773

ANDROID PHONE

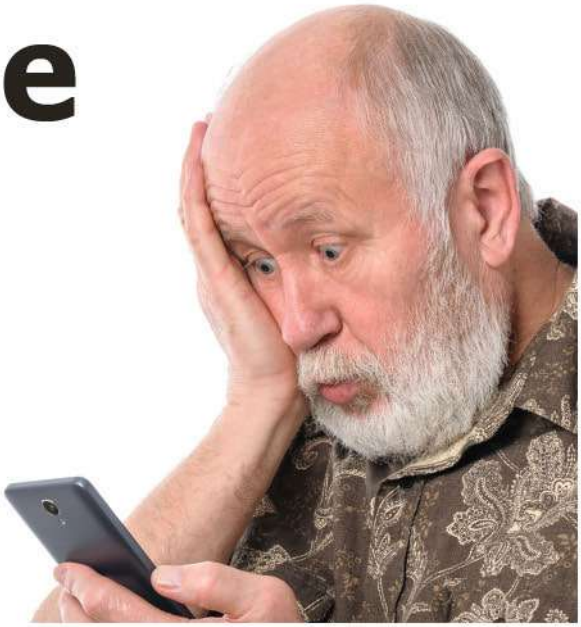
PRICE DROP

Google Pixel 7a
£329 from www.snipca.com/46332
Tested Issue 660

A cheaper version of Google's flagship phone, this uses AI to add clarity to photos, and lasts an impressive 10 hours. Has a fast processor and 8GB RAM to supercharge performance.

ALTERNATIVE Xiaomi Poco F3 This remains an excellent phone, with 6GB RAM and 128GB storage. The only phone under £450 that's faster is the iPhone SE. £259 from www.snipca.com/44553

Now's the time to tackle your smartphone



Are you missing out on everything you could do with it? With these helpful books, there's nothing to fear about using smartphones. Find out more...

Modern mobile phones (smartphones as they're called) can do so much more than just make phone calls – from browsing the web wherever you are, to checking train times, to acting as a sat-nav...

And best of all they can make it so easy to keep in touch with family and friends – in so many ways, from sharing photos to making video calls.

But using them isn't always as easy as you'd want – and that's putting it mildly!

Do the manufacturers do it on purpose?

Sometimes it can seem like the manufacturers deliberately make them complicated. It can drive you absolutely bonkers.

Whether you have problems with the basics or you're trying to do something slightly more advanced, it can be easy to use them... once you know how. But until you've been shown, it can be like talking a different language.

That's why we've published these books: *iPhones One Step at a Time*, *Android Phones One Step at a Time* and *Doro Smartphones One Step at a Time*.

Suitable for iPhones and Android smartphones like Samsungs, and DORO (not sure what phone you have? Best send off for the free info pack)

Plain English... and that's not all

They explain how to use the phone, in plain simple language with pictures of the screen showing you exactly where to tap or slide your fingers. No jargon!

What's covered?

I can't list it all here. But amongst other things, you'll discover:

- The basics of controlling it – swiping, tapping, opening apps & so on.
- How to use it as a sat-nav... in the car or even on foot.
- Send emails from your phone.
- Instant messaging and how to use it.
- Most phones have a good camera built in – here's how to use it properly.
- Share photos with friends around the world – quickly and easily.
- Video phone calls – a great way to keep up with family who live a long way away.

And obviously, you can make phone calls and send and receive text messages. ("Voicemail" is covered, too). All explained nice and simply. (Find out more in the free infopack – read on...)

What one reader had to say:

"Thanks for a fantastic smart phone book. Very pleasant staff as usual.

I think this book should be sold with every smart phone. I have learnt so much from it, the info you get with the phone is non-existent. Smart phones are quite complex, and your books speak in plain English."

Only half the story

That's only half the story, but I don't have room to explain here. I've put together full information on the books – who they're for, what they cover and so on. What's more, the books also come with a free gift – no room to explain that here either.

Don't buy now, do this instead

The books aren't available in the shops or on Amazon. Instead, send off now to get a completely free, no-obligation information pack. It'll explain what the books cover, who they're suitable for and so on.

Just email your postal address to **PC0324@helpfulbooks.co.uk** today – we'll post your full infopack to you straight away (and we'll keep your details private – we won't share them).

Or if you prefer, give us a ring on **01229 777606** and speak to Jade, Shanice, Shannon or Emma – lines open Monday to Friday, 8.30am-5.30pm. Or you can post the coupon to **The Helpful Book Company, 13B Devonshire Road Estate, Millom, Cumbria LA18 4JS**.

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Buy It

Our pick of products that have won the Buy It award

MINI PC

PRICE DROP

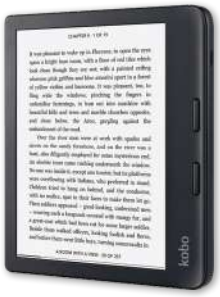
Minisforum UM780XTX
£709 from www.snipca.com/48917
Tested Issue 676

This powerful machine costs only £80 more than the Beelink SER6 Pro, but has twice the memory, twice the storage and a superior processor. These help it run PC tasks faster and handle graphics more smoothly. Ports include USB-C, USB 3.0, HDMI, DisplayPort and Gigabit Ethernet.

ALTERNATIVE Beelink SER6 Pro 7753HS Has 32GB RAM and a 500GB SSD for slick Windows performance. £629 from www.snipca.com/46416

EBOOK READER

Kobo Libra 2
£170 from www.snipca.com/40645
Tested Issue 624



A fantastic 7in screen, 32GB of storage and Bluetooth connectivity make this a rival to Amazon's Oasis ebook reader, yet it's much cheaper. Battery life is superb – we managed 54 hours of use per charge. It supports OverDrive, so you can borrow ebooks from libraries.

ALTERNATIVE Amazon Kindle This low-cost option is a good choice, especially now it has 16GB of storage. £85 from www.snipca.com/44221

SECURITY SOFTWARE

Norton 360 Premium
£19.99 from www.snipca.com/33247
Tested Issue 629

Norton has always performed strongly in our antivirus tests, regularly making the top three. Owned by US firm NortonLifeLock, it's available at a discount on our Software Store. Use the link above for a 10-device, two-year licence. Other versions are available, including Norton 360 for Gamers.

ALTERNATIVE Bitdefender Total Security Another top performer that we're offering at a discount. £29.99 from www.snipca.com/41141

WEBCAM

Logitech C925e Business Webcam
£74 from www.snipca.com/41104
Tested Issue 608

Despite the name, this webcam is also great for home users. Its standout feature is automatically adjusting itself to keep your picture looking sharp. It offers a 78-degree field of view, which is fine for everyday video chats with one person in front of the camera.

ALTERNATIVE Anker PowerConf C300 Good image quality, crisp audio and lots of features. £70 from www.snipca.com/41105

PC MONITOR

Iiyama ProLite XU2492HSU-B2
£120 from www.snipca.com/49491
Tested Issue 618

This 23.8in screen is superb value, with a resolution of 1920x1080 pixels. Colour is good, covering 88 per cent of the sRGB colour range. Connect your computer via HDMI, DisplayPort or VGA, and there's a USB hub to plug in your mouse and keyboard.

ALTERNATIVE AOC 27P2C This also has a 1920x1080 resolution. It's 27 inches, so pixel density is lower, but you'll only notice if you look really closely. £216 from www.snipca.com/41609

SOLID-STATE DRIVE

Corsair MP600 Pro LPX 500GB
£67 from www.snipca.com/41547
Tested Issue 630

In our tests, this M.2 SSD hit speeds of 7,364MB/s and 6,870MB/s when reading and writing data – astonishingly fast scores. It's compatible with the new PCIe 4.0 standard, which is twice as fast as PCIe 3.0. The 1TB model costs £94; 2TB costs £144.

ALTERNATIVE Crucial MX500 500GB As fast as an SSD can get in the traditional 2.5in SATA format, this is a great-value upgrade. £56 from www.snipca.com/37304

COMPETITION

Win 1 of 3 Synology BeeDrive 1TB portable SSDs

Winner of a 'Buy It!' award in Issue 678 (page 28), Synology's BeeDrive portable SSD acts like traditional storage when plugged into a PC, but adds Synology's excellent BeeDrive backup software. This lets you pair it with your PC by signing into your Synology account before choosing from three options: Computer Backup, File Sync and Mobile Transfer.

When you back up folders all your changes will be instantly replicated to BeeDrive, while retaining up to five past versions in case of accidental overwrites.

You can effortlessly switch between work and home computers without missing a beat. Simply plug in BeeDrive and it will automatically sync your latest changes, ensuring seamless productivity no matter where you are.

If you're running low on storage space on your phone, simply back up photos and videos to BeeDrive over Wi-Fi or your network. You can even back up remotely as long as your computer isn't sleeping.

In this competition we're offering three 1TB SSDs. To enter, answer the question at www.snipca.com/49501 and submit your details. It runs until midnight Tuesday 12 April. Good luck!

You can buy **Synology's BeeDrive** in three capacities: 1TB (£129.60), 2TB (£214.80) and 4TB (£311.99). Visit Synology's store to purchase: www.snipca.com/49503.

PRINTER

Epson EcoTank ET-2830

£230 from www.snipca.com/48962
Tested Issue 676

This replaces the ET-1810 as our favourite printer because it adds copying and scanning to its functions for only £80 more. Print quality is great, especially for photos, which have crisp details, vivid colours and realistic skin tones.

ALTERNATIVE Epson EcoTank ET-1810
Not the fastest printer, but comes with enough ink for 4,500 mono and 7,500 colour pages. £140 from www.snipca.com/43670

SMART TV

Samsung Q60B

£395 from www.snipca.com/45083
Tested Issue 652

With our former favourite – the TCL 55RP620K – out of stock, Samsung's 43in set is our new pick. It has excellent colour reproduction in well-lit scenes, and the picture is wonderfully sharp, especially in 4K.

ALTERNATIVE LG OLED42C3
LG's 42in TV is more than double the price, but unlike TCL's model it has an OLED screen, boosting picture quality considerably. £900 from www.snipca.com/47271

ROUTER

PRICE DROP

Asus RT-AXE7800

£207 from www.snipca.com/47586
Tested Issue 665

This router has Wi-Fi 6E, so will be capable of the fastest possible speeds on the 6GHz network over the next few years. It has five Ethernet ports and also a USB 3.0 port to connect a hard drive or NAS drive.

ALTERNATIVE Synology WRX560
Our previous favourite remains an excellent choice, delivering speeds of up to 791.5Mbps. Add more units to set up mesh Wi-Fi. £279 from www.snipca.com/49161

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Workshops & Tips

Pull Out & Keep
Issue 680

14 pages of easy-to-follow workshops and expert tips

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38 Download BBC programmes to your PC
40 Readers' Tips
42 Browser Tips: Ask Copilot about the contents of screenshots

PLUS
44 Phone & Tablet Tips
46 Make Windows Better
47 Make Office Better
48 In the Club: Create a leaderboard

HOW TO...

Resurrect an old hard drive using a docking station

by Nik Rawlinson

What you need: Docking station; old hard drive **Time required:** From 30 minutes to several days

This issue, we've been inspired by a letter we received from reader Joe Webber, who discovered some old hard drives while spring cleaning. Realising he had no way to connect them to his PC, he wrote to ask whether we had any suggestions.

As luck would have it, we have several old drives that haven't been touched for years. In some cases, we've lost their cables or power chargers. We could try finding replacements from the original manufacturers, online stores or second-hand websites, but as they're all different and we don't know what voltages they require, we've opted for another solution: a drive docking station. This will let us connect multiple drives in sequence for occasional use, or leave one or two connected for extended periods if we want to give them a useful second life.

1 Choose a docking station

We're using the Fideco USB 3.0 Dual Bay HDD Docking Station (£36 from Amazon, www.snipca.com/49541, pictured below). The reason we opted for this device over the many others on sale is that it has two slots that can accommodate two drives simultaneously, plus two front-mounted USB ports and an SD card slot. That means you can still use it even when you're not connecting drives to it. If you install two drives, you can also clone from one to the other without connecting the dock to your PC.

If you don't need these additional features, consider the cheaper Sabrent horizontal docking station with cover – £29 from www.snipca.com/49542, pictured below.

Both docks support SATA drives – pictured right in the Fideco model. SATA stands for Serial AT Attachment, with the AT in the middle coming from the name of the IBM AT (Advanced Technology) computer, on which the interface first appeared. That computer was released in August 1984, so the standard is approaching 40 years old, and is widely supported.

If you only have one drive to work with and you want either to keep it permanently attached or have the option of putting it away when not in use, you might be better served by a caddy than a dock. This is an enclosure that's designed to be used for the long-term mounting of a single drive. It comes in sizes suitable for either 3.5in 'desktop PC' and 2.5in 'laptop' drives, and is often a cheaper option. We recommend this £10n Ugreen model: www.snipca.com/49569.

Fideco's docking station has two SATA connectors to accommodate external drives

Fideco's docking station has two slots to accommodate two drives simultaneously

Sabrent's docking station has room for just one drive

2 Remove your drive from its case

Every drive will be different, so, unless it's already exposed – perhaps because it was removed from a PC before the computer's disposal – search online for instructions on how to disassemble its enclosure. We found YouTube a good option, by searching for 'remove drive from' followed by the name of the device.

In our case, the process for opening our external hard drive involved disconnecting it, then prising apart the cover by sliding a small screwdriver between the side and rear of its enclosure. We then worked our way around, gently angling it forward until the clips that held the two parts together popped apart. Some cases are easier to access – particularly if they have exposed screws – but consider wearing suitable hand protection to avoid causing an injury if your tool slips.

Once you get inside an external hard-drive case, you'll find the drive itself connected to a small motherboard, which controls data transfer and power. It's usually secured with a few screws. Remove this, and any attached cables, being careful not to damage any of the connections.

3 Connect to the docking station

When you've removed the drive from its casing, take a look at its connector. Like the small motherboard, its interface handles both data and power. Sensibly, it's been designed so that its positioning on both the drive and the dock makes it impossible to connect the two the wrong way around. Check that the switch on the back of the docking station is off so the unit is unpowered, and position it so the memory-card slots are facing you.

The flaps that partially cover the SATA connectors within our docking station's slots have a notch cut out of them for 2.5in drives. If yours is this size, slide it down through the gap and press it gently but firmly into the interface. If it doesn't seem to be taking, press down the flap so you can see what's going on at the bottom of the slot. This will help you check that everything is lined up, so you don't risk bending or otherwise damaging the interface on the drive or in the dock.

If you're inserting a larger 3.5in drive, the partial cover will fold into the slot to make space for the drive. You may find a drive of this size easier to connect as there will be less opportunity for it to wiggle or get out of alignment.

In either case, check that the drive is properly seated, then connect the docking station to a spare USB port on your PC. The Fideco dock that we're using is a USB 3.0 device, which has a USB-A 3.0 connector at the end for your PC, and a USB-B 3.0 connector for the dock. You might not have seen a Type B 3.0 connector before, which has an additional enclosure at the top to keep it in place.

Note how the plastic tongue at either end of the bundled lead, and in the port on the dock (pictured below), is blue. This indicates that the port supports higher speed data transmission. In this case, the dock that we're using can transfer data at up to 5Gbps, as long as you're using an appropriate cable and have connected it to high-speed ports at both ends.

So, to give the dock the best chance of performing well, check for blue ports on your PC and, if you have a spare one, use it to connect the Type A 3.0 plug. Use the switch on the back of the docking station to turn it on.

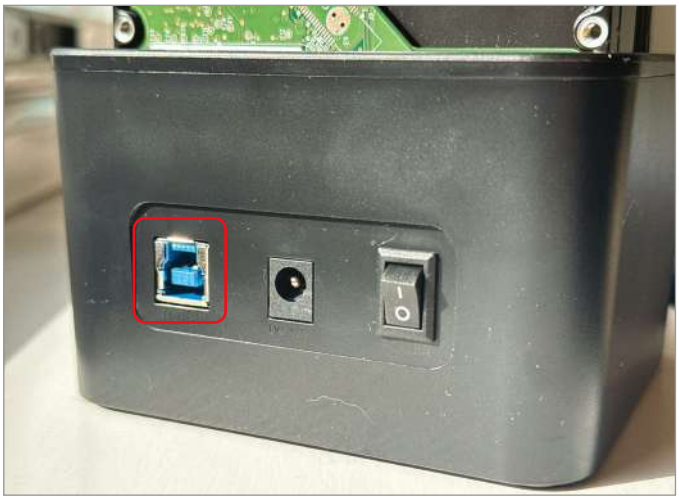
How I'll use my reclaimed drive

It looks like I have an old working drive that I couldn't access, but I'll be very wary of using it. I don't know why it was inaccessible in the first place, so I'll avoid putting any important data on it. Also, I'll always make sure I have a complete backup of its contents. I've decided to repurpose it to store an expanded music collection. At least if I lose that and have to spend time recovering it from an external backup, it won't stop me getting on with work – as would have happened if I'd used it for more important data.

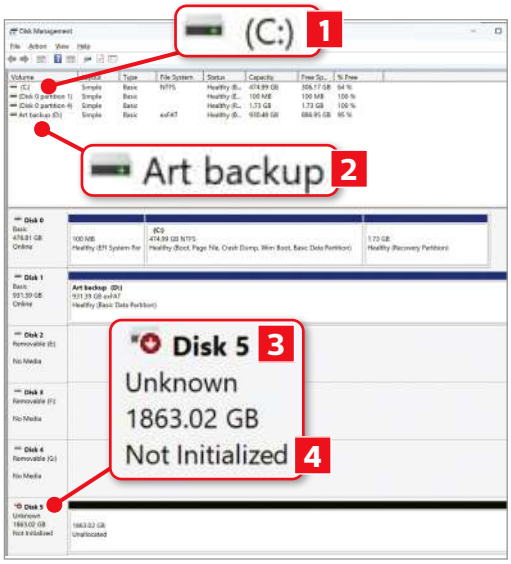
Nik Rawlinson

How would you use a resurrected hard drive?
Please let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk

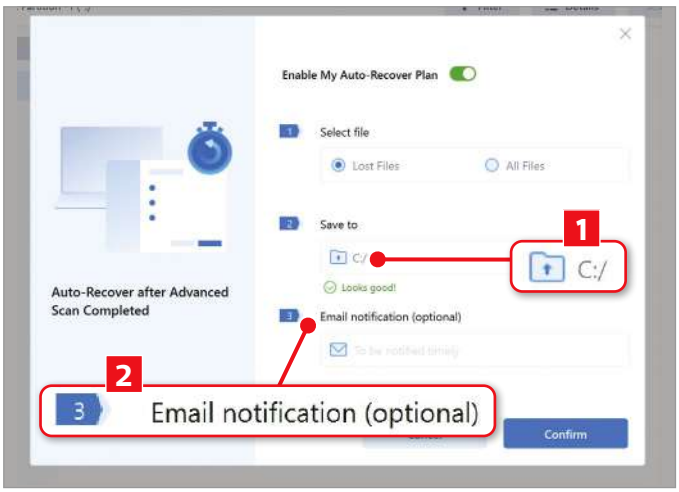
Mounted drives sit vertically in the dock. Here, we've connected both a 2.5in SSD and – behind it – a 3.5in hard drive



The blue connector on the far left indicates our docking station can transfer data at 5Gbps



Disk Management reveals the existence of a drive (Disk 5) that isn't visible in Windows File Explorer



If you're using the paid-for version of Data Recovery, you can automate it to retrieve files

4 Access files on your drive

If your drive is fault-free, Windows should identify it and connect. Open File Explorer and look for the drive on the left, where it will have been given a letter (such as D:, E: and so on) and a name. Unfortunately for us, our drive didn't appear, suggesting that it had been damaged in the years it wasn't being used.

Don't give up if you have the same problem: Windows might be able to see the drive, but just not know how to use it. Press the Windows key and type partition, then click 'Create and format hard disk partitions'. This launches the Disk Management tool, which lists all the storage devices connected to your computer.

As you can see from the table at the top of our screenshot above, we have two working physical drives. 'C:' 1 is our internal hard drive from which we boot the system, and 'D:' 2 is a backup drive that we use to create a second copy of our art projects.

However, the graphical representation of drives below the table reveals Disk 5 3, which has a capacity of 1.8TB – suspiciously close to the 2TB capacity of the drive we recovered from the enclosure, and which is connected via the dock. Windows states that the disk is Not Initialized 4, which suggests that it either isn't formatted, or there's a problem with the table of files stored on the drive. This isn't good news, but there's something we can try to fix it.

The problem might lie with how the files are indexed on your drive. If so, they might still exist in their original locations. To find this out, run data-recovery software to scan the surface of the drive, sector by sector. If it finds any remnants of your data, you'll now have the opportunity to make a safe copy.

This can take a long time. We used EaseUS Data Recovery Wizard (www.snipca.com/49544), which informed us that "it's very likely to find data when the scan comes to 20%". However, it took around four hours for it to reach just one per cent, which means scanning the whole drive could take as long as 400 hours.

If you're in a similar position, you don't need to sit watching it that whole time as there's an Auto-Recovery option, but to use it you'll need to upgrade to the paid-for version, which costs $69 (£54) a month and $149 (£117) for a lifetime licence. It also lifts the 2GB limit on how much data you can recover. This may well be worth paying if the software finds a lot of lost files. Alternatively, you can leave it running in the background to see what it uncovers, before making a decision on whether to pay to recover the whole lot.

If you are prepared to upgrade and you want to use Auto-Recovery, click the stopwatch button at the bottom of the recovery window, then set where you'd like it to save any files it recovers. By default it will save them to your C:drive (1 in our screenshot above right), but we'd recommend creating a sub-folder. Click 'Browse...', then navigate to C: by clicking it in the sidebar.

Now click 'New folder' and call the folder recovered files. Click 'Select Folder' to return to the previous box. If you want to be alerted when the operation has finished, type your email address into the 'Email notification' box 2, then click Confirm.

5 Reformat your drive

Whether or not you recover any files, you'll need to wipe your drive before you can use it again. You should be able to do this by right-clicking it in File Explorer and selecting 'Format...'. But if your drive doesn't appear in File Explorer, you'll need to wipe it through Drive Management.

First, right-click the drive in the left-hand margin, then select Initialize Disk (see our screenshot below). Leave the options as they are on the Initialize Disk box that pops up, and click OK.

If the 'Not Initialized' notice below its name changes to Online, you can now try formatting it for use. Right-click in the Unallocated box beside it in the main part of the window and click New Simple Volume on the menu that appears. Click through the instructions, accepting the default options, and click Finish on the last screen. Windows will attempt to format the drive.

At first, our drive refused to format, warning that 'The device is not ready'. However, we rebooted and tried again, and this time the drive formatted smoothly, and appeared in the Windows sidebar as Disk 2.

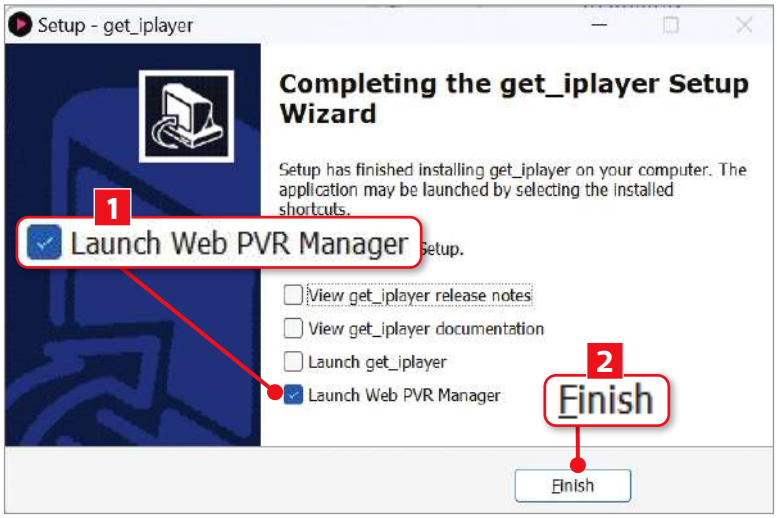
To reformat your hard drive, right-click it then select Initialize Disk

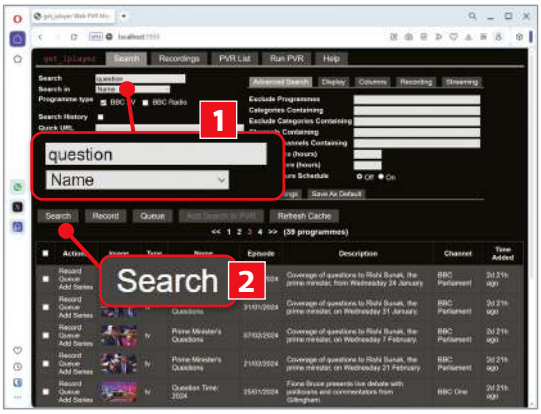
Download BBC programmes to your PC

What you need: Get_iplayer
Time required: 30 minutes plus download time

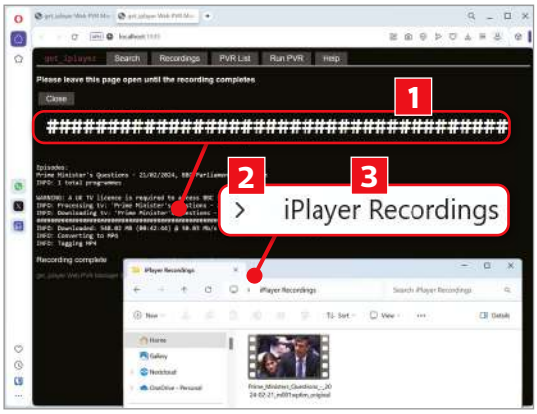
The BBC is shutting down its iPlayer download service for PCs. You'll still be able to transfer content to a phone or tablet to watch at your leisure, but if you're using a desktop PC, laptop or Mac, you'll only be able to stream live content. Fortunately, there is a workaround. The free Get_iplayer program lets you download BBC TV and radio programmes – though not podcasts or Red Button content – so you can enjoy it offline. Although Get_iplayer is not a BBC-owned service, you will still need a TV licence to watch or listen to your downloads.

STEP 1 To download Get_iplayer, visit www.snipca.com/49454 and click the 'get_iplayer-3.35.0-windows-x64-setup.exe' file. The program should work on Windows XP or later, although the developers don't support anything earlier than Windows 10. When the file has finished downloading, launch it, and when the User Account Control pops up, click Yes to confirm that you want to run it. Click through the setup instructions, leaving the default options as they are. When you reach the final screen, leave Launch Web PVR Manager 1 ticked and click Finish 2.

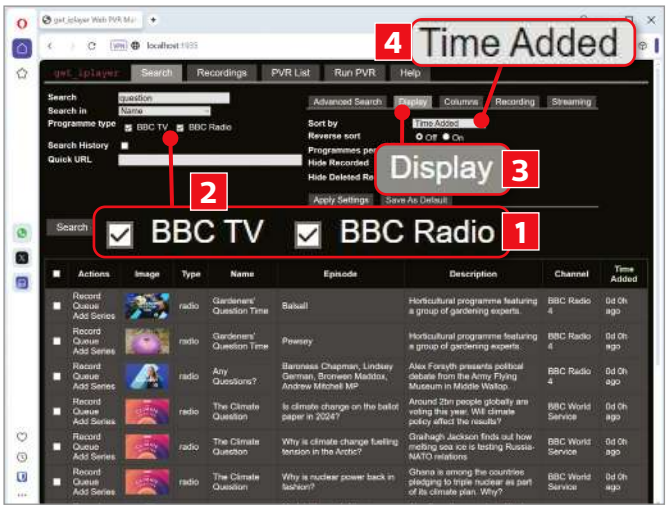




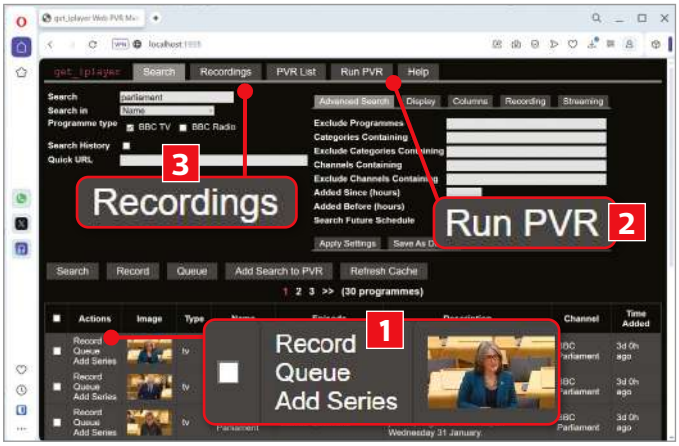
STEP 2 You'll be redirected to to a web page in your browser at http://localhost:1935. In the background, Get_iplayer will now download an index of TV and radio programmes available on iPlayer, which will appear on the page. Use the search box at the top 1 and click Search 2 to find specific programmes. You don't need to type a complete programme name to find it. So, searching for question would find *First Minister's Questions*, *Question Time*, and *Prime Minister's Questions* and more.



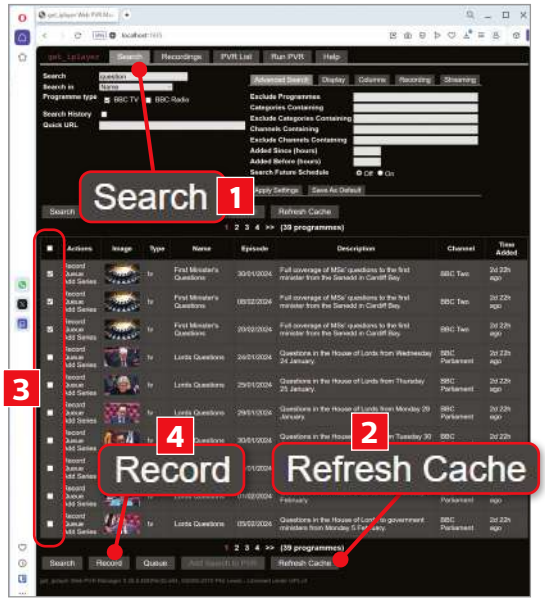
STEP 3 When you've found a programme you want to download, click the Record link to the left of its thumbnail image. The browser will load a text-based page and start downloading the programme. A line of hashes (#) will indicate progress 1. When it's finished, it will convert the file and save it to your computer. To find it, open a File Explorer window and click the arrow to the right of the computer in the address bar 2. Select iPlayer Recordings 3, then double-click the video to open it in your default media player.



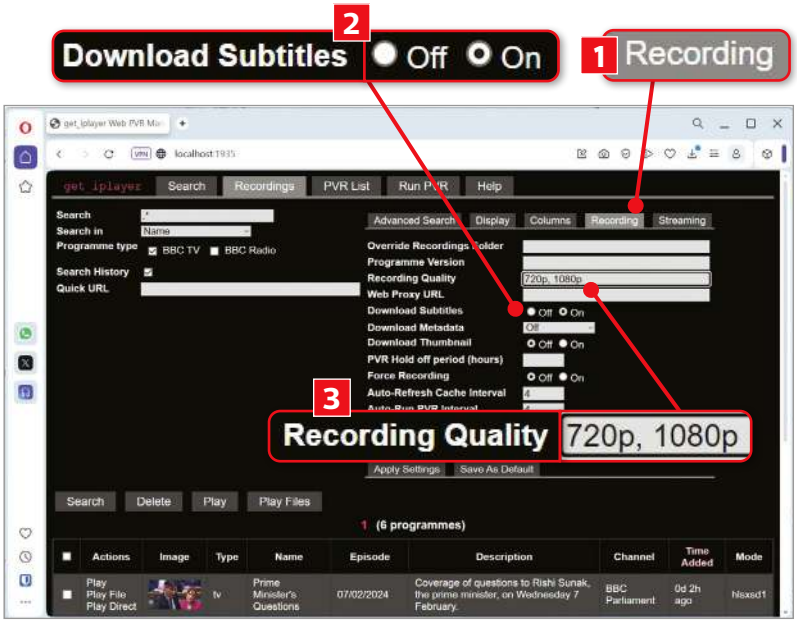
STEP 4 All of the results of our search in Step 2 pointed to TV programmes. If you're looking for radio programmes such as *Gardeners' Question Time* or *Any Questions* repeat the search but this time tick the box beside BBC Radio 1 and (optionally) untick the box beside BBC TV 2. The two programmes we've mentioned are weekly series so to quickly find the most recent episode, click Display 3, then choose Time Added 4 in the dropdown menu beside 'Sort by', then click Search.



STEP 5 If you watch the same programmes regularly, you can set Get_iplayer to download them automatically. Search for them in the way described in Steps 2 to 4 and, rather than clicking the Record link, click Add Series next to the programme thumbnail 1. It will download the required details for the selected programme and add these to the PVR (Personal Video Recorder) List. Switch to the Run PVR tab 2 and it will check for updates every four hours. Automatically downloaded programmes will appear on the Recordings tab 3.



STEP 6 If you don't use Get_iplayer for a while, the list of available programmes may become out of date the next time you launch it. Update it by clicking the Search tab 1, followed by Refresh Cache 2. If your searches now display multiple programmes/episodes that you'd like to download, rather than clicking Record beside each of them, you can tick the boxes to the left of their thumbnails 3, then click Record 4. They will each be downloaded in sequence.



STEP 7 If you want to display subtitles when viewing a programme, you can include them in the download by clicking Recording 1, then the On button beside Download Subtitles 2. While here, you can also change the download format to save drive space if you don't need full-resolution videos. Do this by clicking in the Recording Quality box 3, then typing the options you want get_iplayer to try, in order of preference. So, if you want it to try downloading a regular HD version, and only opt for full HD if it can't find regular HD, type 720p, 1080p, then click Apply Settings. Hover over the Recording Quality box to see which other options are available.

Readers' Tips

TIP OF THE FORTNIGHT

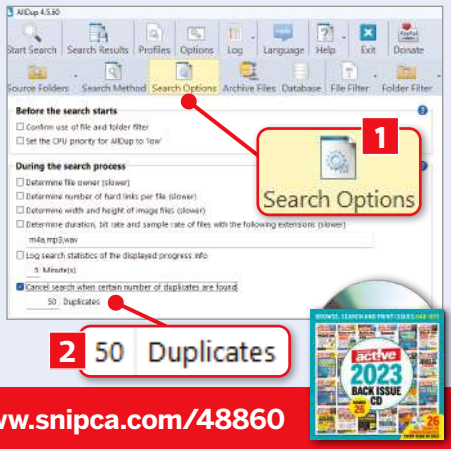
Pause duplicate-file scan after set number

AllDup (www.snipca.com/49056) is such a brilliant duplicate remover that you could have devoted the whole of Issue 677's Cover Feature to it, not just one page. One hidden option you didn't mention was the option to cancel its scan after it's found a set number of duplicate files. This can help you deal with duplicates in batches, so you don't feel overwhelmed by them.

Open AllDup, then click Search Options (1 in our screenshot) and look for the 'During the search process' heading. Now tick the box 'Cancel search when certain number of duplicates are found' and in the box below replace the default 999 with a new number. I normally select just 50 2 because dealing with more than that in one go is too daunting.

As you can imagine, limiting the scan to 50 means it takes hardly any time at all – even less than the four seconds it took you to find 656 duplicates.

Colin North



Colin wins a copy of our 2023 Back Issue CD **Buy it from us at www.snipca.com/48860**

MUSIC

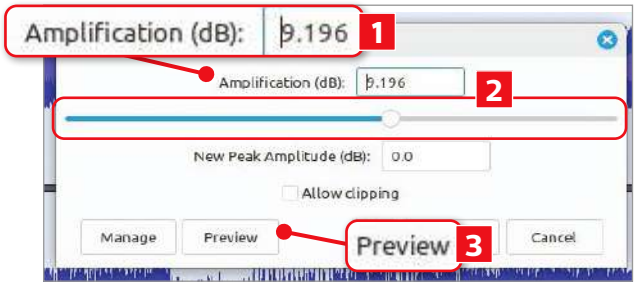
Digitise cassettes using car audio cables

In Issue 677's Reader Support (page 71), Roger Hewitt was having trouble digitising his old cassettes using a USB cable. I did this successfully by using a car's aux cable that has a 3.5in jack at each end. One plugs into the earphones socket of the cassette player, and the other into a 3.5in jack input socket on my computer. I found I couldn't hear what was being recorded so I bought a headphone splitter which allows me to insert headphones while still connecting the two devices.

I use Audacity (www.audacityteam.org) to record the audio. Launch this, and make sure the volume is at about halfway on both your player and computer. Click the Record button in Audacity, then put on your headphones and press play on your cassette player.

Once completed, the recording will be presented as a waveform. Highlight the blank sections at the start and end and remove them. Now click Select at the top of Audacity, then choose 'All'. Next, click Effect, then Amplify. Audacity will show you the maximum amplification without distortion. It's 9.196 decibels (dB) in our screenshot below left 1. You can move the slider to change this 2, and click Preview 3 to hear it. Click OK when you're happy. When completed, export your recording through the File menu.

Bill Power



VIDEO CHAT

Share screenshots on Skype

Thanks to the knowledge I've gained from years of reading *Computeractive* I'm now considered the tech expert of our extended family. As such I'm often asked to take part in Skype video chats to help perform various PC tasks. This is made easier by being able to share screenshots directly in Skype with just a few clicks.

First take a screenshot in Snipping Tool (press Windows key+Shift+S) and you should see it appear as a notification at

Why I stopped using...

Windows 11 S

A year ago I bought an HP14-s fq00170na laptop (www.snipca.com/49395, pictured) for just £170. It had the minimum requirements for Windows 11 S, which was preinstalled. For 10 months it performed poorly.

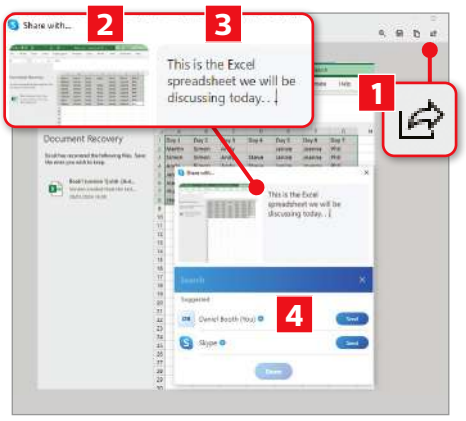
And what I use instead...

The laptop was just so slow. It was slow to start, slow to open web pages, slow to open email. I was apprehensive about ditching Windows 11 S, but I was frustrated about being restricted to apps downloaded from the Microsoft Store.

So I decided to delete Microsoft Edge as a startup app and installed **Google Chrome** instead. The laptop now boots almost immediately, and opens websites quickly. In fact, it's as fast as an iPad, though I don't know whether such humble equipment would be of interest to readers of *Computeractive*. I'd love to know how my amateur fiddling achieved such good results.

Chris Lord

Tell us why you stopped using a website, app or program: letters@computeractive.co.uk



the bottom right of your screen. Click this to see it, then click the Share icon (1 in our screenshot above) then click the Skype icon at the bottom. Sign into your account and you'll see your screenshot appear in a Skype box 2, next to a box where you can type a message 3. You can then send it to any of your contacts listed below 4.

Liam Forster

Reader recommends...

Amazon Echo Show 8

£150 from www.snipca.com/48304

When I was a teenager my parents bought a portable telly for the kitchen which we watched as we cooked and ate. Portable TVs seem to have vanished, but Amazon's Echo Show 8 is an excellent modern equivalent. I had been considering buying one for a while, and your positive review in Issue 672 (page 26) was the final nudge I needed.

In fact, it's more than just a 21st-century version of a portable TV. You can play any music you like (the audio quality is impressive), listen to the radio and podcasts, get calendar updates, make video calls, see recent photos you've taken and more. We weren't able to do any of that on our Bush portable set 40 years ago.

It feels like the kind of futuristic gadget filmmakers would imagine for films made in the 1980s whenever they wanted to show the 'home of the future'. Perhaps the best example of this is when I tell Alexa to turn off the lights upstairs.

Chris Gray

Want to recommend hardware or software to fellow readers? Email letters@computeractive.co.uk

SOFTWARE

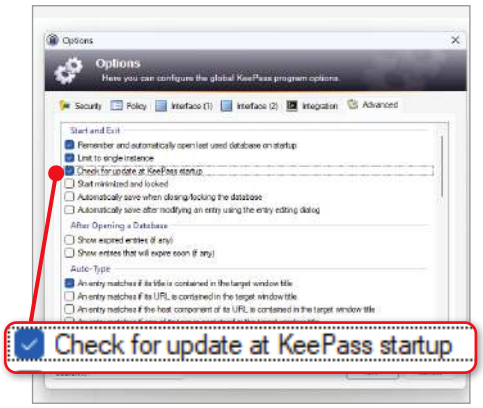
Set KeePass to update automatically

Thanks for mentioning the new tools in version 2.56 of KeePass (Issue 679, page 11). It's the password manager I use, so I like to learn about any small tools added. You explained that you can check for updates in the Help menu, but a better option is to set the software to automatically check for updates whenever you launch KeePass.

To activate this, click Tools at the top, then Options followed by Advanced. Now tick 'Check for update at KeePass startup' (see screenshot below) and click OK. If this is already ticked you must have selected the option when you installed KeePass.

If there is an update available, it doesn't install automatically. Instead you'll see a message, asking you to proceed. I like this approach because it places the power in your hands. After all, there might be a reason why you don't want the update to install.

Gareth Calderwood



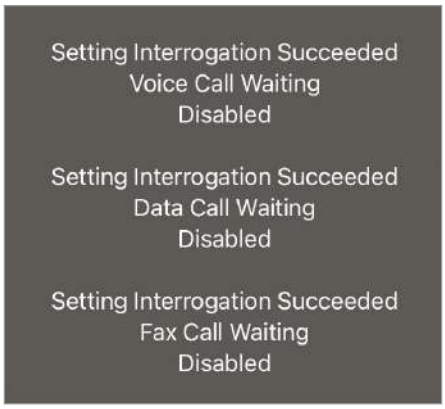
PHONES

Check that 'call waiting' is working

I wasn't sure if I had the 'call waiting' alerts set up on my iPhone. I hadn't remembered ever receiving one, so I checked by typing *#43# (see screenshot above right) then tapping the green call button. This showed that call waiting was disabled (see screenshot below).

I didn't recall turning it off, but it was easy to get it working again. I just typed *43#, pressed the green button again, and it was reactivated.

Gary Hardy



SOFTWARE

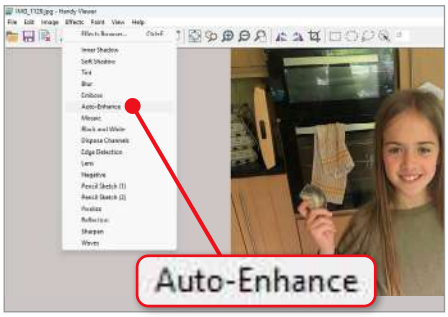
Use 'Auto-Enhance' to improve your photos

I've been using Handy Viewer (www.snipca.com/49155) ever since you recommended it in Issue 677 (page 18), and I agree with your assessment that it's easy to use. I was pleasantly surprised by how many effects it offers, but the one I've used most is Auto-Enhance, which you'll find in the Effects menu at the top (see screenshot below).

Selecting it automatically adjusts the brightness and contrast. It doesn't always produce a considerably better photo, but it's worth trying as a quick fix to save any further fiddling. For more control over the brightness and contrast levels, click Image and select Adjust Colors.

I still don't know whether Handy Viewer will ultimately replace IrfanView (www.irfanview.com) as my favourite image editor. For the moment I'm happily using both.

Brian Galvin



BRAVE

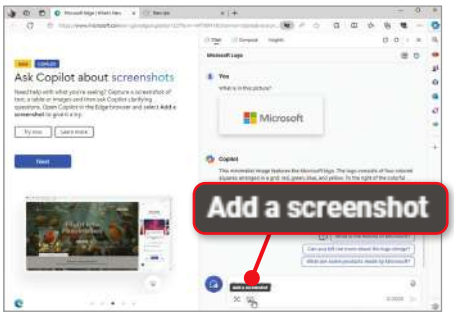
Move your tabs to the right side of the browser

One useful feature you get in Brave but not in Chrome is 'vertical tabs', which displays your tabs in a panel on the left-hand side of the browser rather than in a bar across the top. As well as requiring less mouse movement to click tabs, this stops them being squashed whenever you open new ones, so you can always view their full titles and browse them more easily.

Brave 1.63, released at the end of February, expands the feature by letting you place vertical tabs down the right-hand side of the browser, instead of the left, if you find that easier to access. You can then open new tabs by clicking the 'New tab' button at the bottom of the panel, or by pressing Ctrl+T.

To activate the new option, click Brave's three-line menu button and select Settings then Appearance. Scroll down to the Tabs section and switch on 'Use vertical tabs' (1 in our screenshot below). This will open the vertical-tabs panel on the left, but you can now choose 'Show on the right' 2 to move it to the right.

To stop the vertical-tabs panel taking up too much space, either drag its edge to resize it or click the button in its top-right corner 3 to reduce it to a narrow sidebar, which shows only the favicons for the sites in your tabs. Select the 'Expand vertical tabs panel on mouseover when collapsed' option to reveal your tabs by hovering your cursor over this bar, without needing to click anything.



EDGE

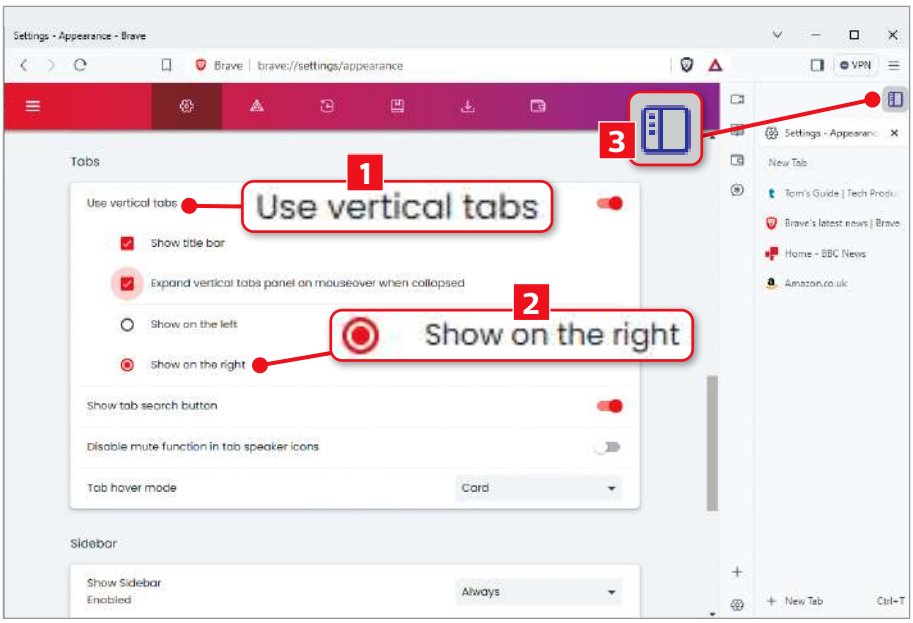
Ask Copilot about the contents of screenshots

In Issue 679 (page 43), we wrote about the improved Screenshot feature in Edge 122, which lets you capture screen grabs of areas outside the browser. Microsoft has now added a screenshot function to its Copilot tool that lets you ask the AI assistant questions about the contents of your screenshots.

This allows you to get information about an image or section of text on a web page without having to look it up yourself, and is actually one of the more useful benefits of Copilot.

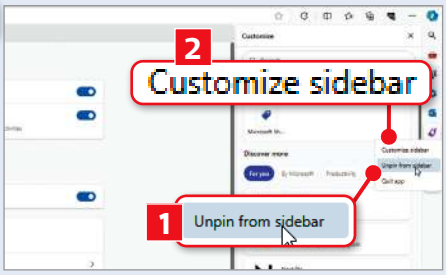
To try the new feature, open Copilot in Edge by clicking its button in the top-right corner, then click the 'Add a screenshot' button below the 'Ask me anything' box (see screenshot above) to launch the browser's Screenshot tool. Drag the crosshairs over the content you want to learn more about, then click Done to capture the screenshot.

Once the image is added to the 'Ask me anything' box, type a question you want to ask about its subject and click the Send button. Copilot will then respond with a

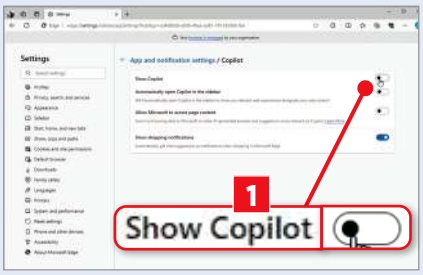


WORKSHOP Hide or customise the sidebar in Edge

1 To hide the sidebar on the right-hand side of Edge, click the Settings cog at the bottom and untick 'Always show sidebar' 1. To show it again, go into Edge's settings, choose Sidebar and turn the 'Always show sidebar' option 2 back on.



2 Alternatively, you can keep the sidebar but remove unwanted shortcuts by right-clicking them and choosing 'Unpin from sidebar 1'. To add a more useful shortcut to the sidebar, click 'Customize sidebar' 2 then Open and select 'Pin to sidebar'.



3 Hiding the sidebar won't remove the Copilot button from Edge's top-right corner. To do this, select Copilot in the 'App and notifications' section of the Sidebar settings, disable the 'Show Copilot' option 1 then restart Edge.

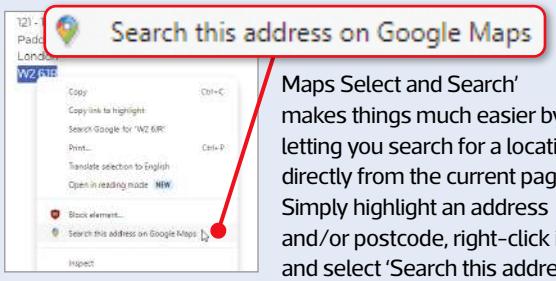
BEST EXTENSION FOR... Finding places on Google Maps

Google Maps Select and Search

Chromium

www.snipca.com/49547

When you want to use Google Maps to look up an address provided on a web page, you have two options. Either copy the address or postcode and paste it into the search box on the Maps website, or right-click it and choose 'Search Google for [address]', then switch to Maps to see the result. 'Google Maps Select and Search' makes things much easier by letting you search for a location directly from the current page. Simply highlight an address and/or postcode, right-click it and select 'Search this address on Google Maps' (see screenshot). The extension will then open Google Maps in a new tab, with the relevant location marked on the map. This enables you to find any address mentioned on the web in a couple of clicks, and is particularly useful if Google isn't your default search engine, but you still like using Google Maps.



If you don't like that, try... Search on Google Maps

Firefox

www.snipca.com/49548

This Firefox extension works in the same way as 'Google Maps Select and Search', except you choose 'Open on Google Maps' when you right-click an address.

detailed and hopefully helpful answer, cite its sources and suggest follow-up questions to ask. You can use the buttons under the answer to copy it to your clipboard, download it as a PDF, text file or Word document, and hear it read aloud.

Edge 122 also added the much-requested option to hide the sidebar on the right-hand side of the browser, which provides shortcuts to various Microsoft tools. See our Workshop below left to find out how to customise the sidebar to suit your needs.

FIREFOX

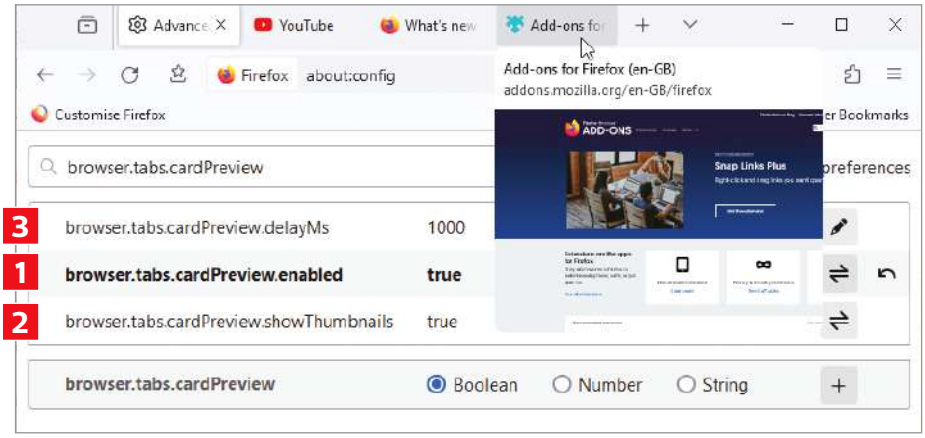
Show previews of tabs when you hover over them

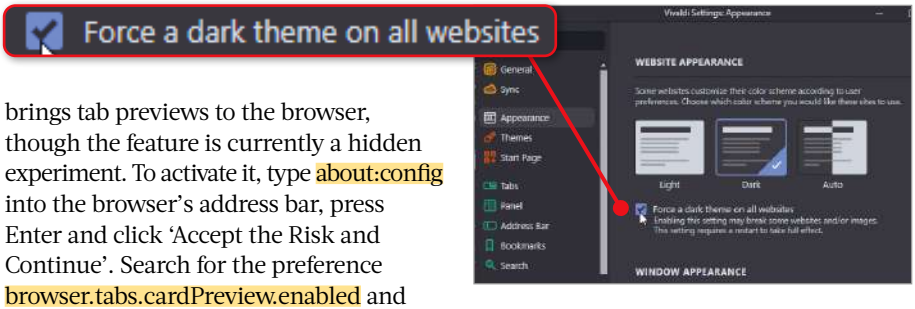
When you hover your cursor over a tab in Chrome and most other Chromium browsers, you'll see a preview image of the relevant web page, so you know what to expect before you switch to that tab. In contrast, Firefox merely displays a tooltip that tells you the title of the page.

Firefox 123, released in February, finally brings tab previews to the browser, though the feature is currently a hidden experiment. To activate it, type about:config into the browser's address bar, press Enter and click 'Accept the Risk and Continue'. Search for the preference browser.tabs.cardPreview.enabled and double-click it to change its value to 'true' (1 in our screenshot below).

This should instantly enable the option, so that when you hover your cursor over a background tab, Firefox shows a thumbnail preview. If not, ensure the preference browser.tabs.cardPreview.showThumbnails is also set to 'true' 2.

If tab previews are working but are slow to load, you can speed up the display time. Find the preference browser.tabs.cardPreview.delayMs 3, click the Edit button next to it and change its value from 1000ms (milliseconds) to 500ms or less. Hopefully the feature will be enabled by default in the next version of Firefox.





VIVALDI

Force all websites to use dark mode

Vivaldi has long offered a dark mode, which helps to reduce eye strain when you're browsing at night by inverting the colours on websites. To apply it, click the menu button in the top-left corner, choose Settings then Appearance, and select the Dark option under Website Appearance.

The trouble is that the feature only works on websites that support dark mode by allowing their colours to be converted. On sites that don't, you're stuck with the default colour scheme.

Vivaldi 6.6, released on 29 February, addresses this problem with a new option that forces all websites to use dark mode. It generates a dark theme by adapting the colour scheme of any site you visit, regardless of the default settings.

You can turn on the option by selecting 'Force a dark theme on all websites' in the Website Appearance section (see screenshot above). You'll need to restart the browser for the change to take effect, and Vivaldi warns that it may cause some pages and images to break.

To apply a dark theme to the browser's own toolbars and menus, choose Themes in the Settings box and select Dark.

ANDROID & iOS

View Google Maps directions on your lock screen

When you're using Google Maps to reach an unfamiliar location, you may need to frequently unlock your phone to check the app's directions. Not only does this slow you down, but it also reduces your device's battery life and puts it at greater risk of being stolen.

To make navigation easier, Google Maps has introduced a feature called 'glanceable directions', which lets you track your progress to your destination from the route overview screen – without having to press the Start button for directions. As you move, your position and estimated time of arrival will be updated on the map, to account for your travel speed and any diversions you take. Best of all, some of this navigation data will appear on your lock screen so you don't need to waste time unlocking your phone and opening the Google Maps app to see where you should head next.

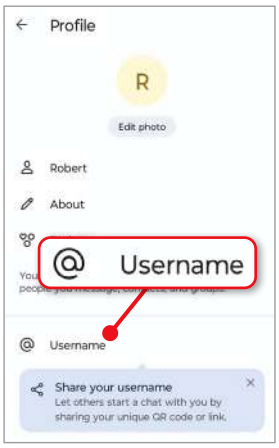
The new option is currently disabled by default, but you can activate it by tapping your profile picture in the Google Maps app and choosing Settings then 'Navigation settings'. Swipe down to 'Glanceable directions while navigating' and switch the option on (see screenshot right). You'll now be able to view Maps directions on the lock screen of your Android phone or iPhone, without unlocking the device.

ANDROID & iOS

Keep your phone number private in Signal

Signal (www.snipca.com/49662) is a popular alternative to WhatsApp, which also provides end-to-end encryption for your messages, but isn't owned by a data-hungry company such as Meta. Previously, for people to contact you on Signal you needed to give them your phone number (if you weren't already in their Contacts), but the app's new usernames feature lets you keep this information private.

Open your Profile settings in the Signal app, select Username (see screenshot above) and enter the username you want to use – this must be between three and 32 characters, with a two-digit suffix – then tap Save. You can now share your username with other people by generating a QR code for them to scan or by sending them a link, without revealing your phone number.



To stop other Signal users seeing your phone number, in both one-to-one and group chats, tap Privacy in the app's Settings and select 'Phone number'. Set the options 'Who can see my number' and 'Who can find me by number' to Nobody. Note that you still need to use your phone number to register with Signal.

ANDROID

Scan documents to your device using 'Files by Google'

In our 'Make Google great again' Cover Feature in Issue 679 (page 57), we explained how you can now scan documents directly to Google Drive, using your phone's camera. This is useful for digitising documents you want to store and share online, but not ideal for receipts, letters, tickets and other items you want to keep on your phone or tablet so you can access them privately offline.

The latest update to the brilliant 'Files by Google' app (www.snipca.com/49612) provides a solution to this problem by letting you scan documents to your mobile device instead. Tap the Scan button in the bottom-right corner of the app (1 in our screenshot above right) to launch your camera, then position the document in

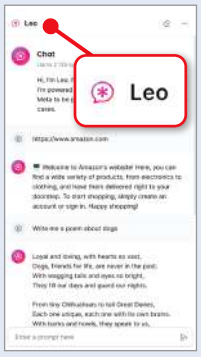
BEST NEW APPS What you should install this fortnight

Brave for Android

Free*

Android www.snipca.com/49663

Brave has added its new AI assistant, Leo, to the Android version of its private browser. Access the tool by tapping the address bar while viewing a web page and choosing Ask Leo. This will provide a summary of the page and suggest follow-up questions to ask. You can also enter text prompts to get Leo to generate content for you.



Adobe Express (Beta)

Free*

Android www.snipca.com/49667

iOS www.snipca.com/49668

The new beta version of Adobe Express brings the company's AI tool, Firefly, to your mobile device. This lets you create images from text prompts; transform photos into videos and animations; insert or remove objects; and add text effects. Premium features are free during the beta period, but iOS users currently need to join a waiting list.

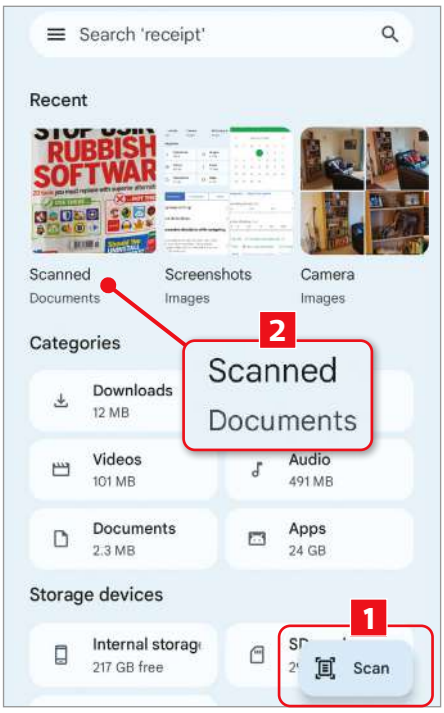
Twodos

Free

iOS www.snipca.com/49666

Adding tasks to to-do list apps can require almost as much effort as completing them. Twodos adopts a much simpler approach by listing all your tasks on a single screen under Sooner or Later headings (depending on their urgency), which you can swipe to mark as done. It also provides widgets for your home and lock screens.

*Contains in-app purchases



the frame and tap the shutter button to scan it.

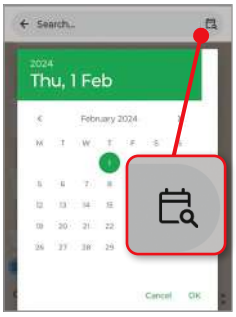
As with the Scan feature in Google Drive, you can crop and rotate the image, use the Filter tab to adjust the colour and contrast, and tap Clean to remove stains and other blemishes. Press 'Apply' then Done to convert the scan to PDF format and save it to the new Scanned Documents folder in 'Files by Google' 2.

From this folder, you can share the file with others, move it to a 'safe folder' that's protected with your screen lock and optionally back it up to Google Drive. See our Cover Feature on page 56 for more about 'Files by Google'.

ANDROID

Search for WhatsApp messages by date

WhatsApp has updated its Android app with the ability to search for messages by date – a feature that's been available in the iOS app for over a year. This saves you having to swipe through long conversation threads to find info you received or sent at a particular time of year.



To use the new option, open an individual or group chat in WhatsApp, then press the three-dot menu icon and choose Search. Tap the calendar button next to the search box (see screenshot below left), select a date and press OK. WhatsApp will then jump to a message in the conversation that was sent on that date – or the day closest to it.

Although you can't search for messages by date from your main Chats list, tapping the search button lets you search for photos, videos, documents and other shared files, as well as for unread messages.

iOS

Use the new emojis in iOS 17.4

The release of iOS 17.4 in March means iPhone and iPad users in the EU can now install third-party app stores on their devices (see page 56 of our Cover Feature). However, for us in the UK the most exciting thing about the update is the addition of 118 new emojis.

These include a fiery phoenix, a brown mushroom, a lime, a broken chain and smiley faces shaking their heads up and down, and side to side. You can also now choose right-facing versions of emojis that show people walking, running, kneeling and in wheelchairs, and use four gender-neutral family designs. All the new emojis are accessible from the keyboard on your iPhone or iPad.

BEST APPS FOR... Improving accessibility using AI

Seeing AI

Free
Android www.snipca.com/49669
iOS www.snipca.com/49670

This new Microsoft app provides a 'talking camera' for blind and visually impaired people. Point your phone's camera at an object or document, or take a photo, and Seeing AI will describe it to you or read aloud its content. The app can also scan barcodes, recognise currency and capture people's faces to recognise in future.

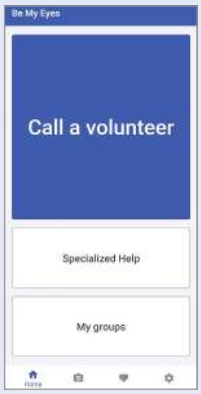
Best For Visually impaired people

Be My Eyes

Free
Android www.snipca.com/49675
iOS www.snipca.com/49676

Be My Eyes connects blind and low-vision individuals with sighted volunteers around the world via live video calls, to provide free help with recognising objects, using appliances and other everyday tasks. It recently added a feature called Be My AI, which describes the contents of images.

Best For Combining human and AI help



Live Transcribe

Free
Android www.snipca.com/49671
iOS* www.snipca.com/49672

Live Transcribe for Android uses automatic speech recognition to transcribe conversations in real time. It can be set to vibrate when someone says your name or resumes speaking after a pause, and alerts you to sounds such as alarms and knocking. The iOS app is from a different developer, but it works in the same way.

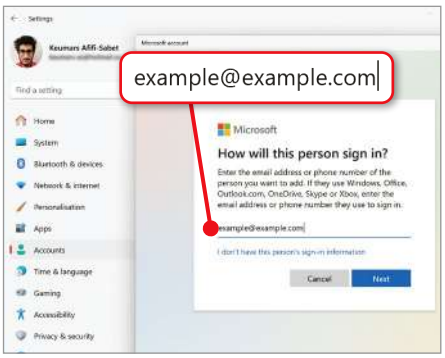
Best For The hard of hearing

*Contains in-app purchases

WINDOWS 10 & 11

Create an account without signing into Microsoft

In Issue 679's 'Question of the Fortnight' we explained how to disconnect from the internet in order to set up a new PC with a local account, rather than having to create an online Microsoft account. Another way to do this is to create an account using a fake email address and password – such as example@example.com (see screenshot below) and asdf. Because Microsoft prevents this account from being created, the Windows setup process will respond by letting you create a local account.

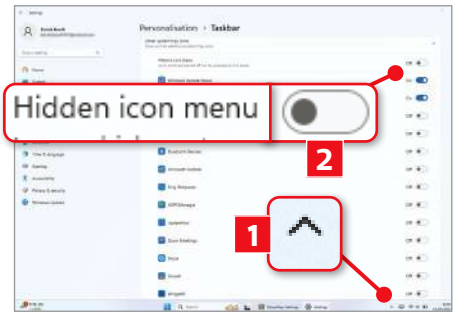


WINDOWS 11

Remove the 'Show hidden icons' button

The system tray on Windows 11's taskbar lets you open several important tools, like volume, internet connection and power status – as well as other icons depending on the apps and services you're running. You can access these by clicking the 'Show hidden icons' arrow (1 in our screenshot below).

If you never open these tools from the system tray, you might want to hide the arrow. First, tap Windows key+I to open Settings. Next, click Personalisation on the left, followed by Taskbar on the right, then 'Other system tray icons'. Look for the 'Hidden icon menu' slider and set this to Off 2. You'll see the arrow vanish on your system tray.



WINDOWS 10 & 11

Use shortcuts to open web pages

Released in early March, version 0.79 of PowerToys has improved the Keyboard Manager to let you create shortcuts that open web pages from your desktop – even if your browser isn't already open. In our example, we created a shortcut to open Gmail.

Open PowerToys then click Keyboard Manager on the left. On the right set the Enable Keyboard Manager slider to On and click 'Remap a shortcut'. Now click 'Add shortcut remapping' (1 in our screenshot). We chose 'Open URI' 2 in the Action dropdown menu under 'To:'. We then typed Gmail's URL in the 'Path/URI:' box 3. Make sure you add 'https://' and 'www'.

Next, we clicked the pencil icon next to 'Shortcut:' 4, and clicked the 'Allow chords' slider to On. Then we pressed Ctrl+Shift+G on our keyboard to set the new shortcut 5, then clicked OK twice. When we now use that shortcut, Gmail opens in a new tab on our default browser.

If you don't use PowerToys, download it from www.snipca.com/49658. If you have it but haven't yet upgraded to 0.79, open the program and look for an 'Update available' button top right.

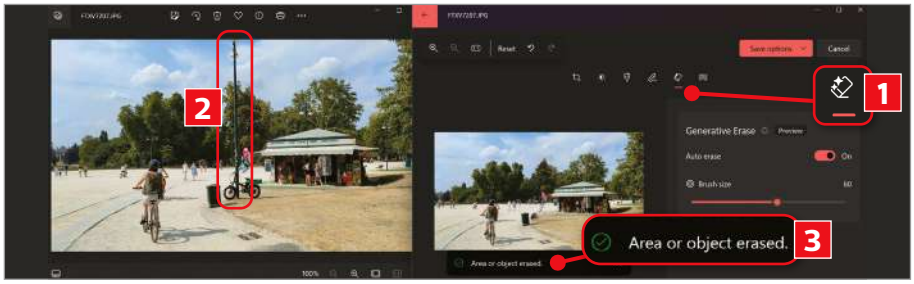
WINDOWS 11

Remove objects from photos

In the Moment 5 update for Windows 11, released in late February, Microsoft added a Generative Erase tool to its Photos app that lets you "fix and remove distractions" from your pictures.

Open the Photos app and choose a photo from your Pictures folder. Double-click to open it, then click 'Edit image'. In the new window, click the Generative Erase button (1 in our screenshot below), then, with the brush tool, draw over the object you want to remove.

In our example, we removed the lamppost 2. When you erase an area, you'll see 'Area or object erased' message at the bottom 3. Click 'Save options' at the top then choose how to save your image.

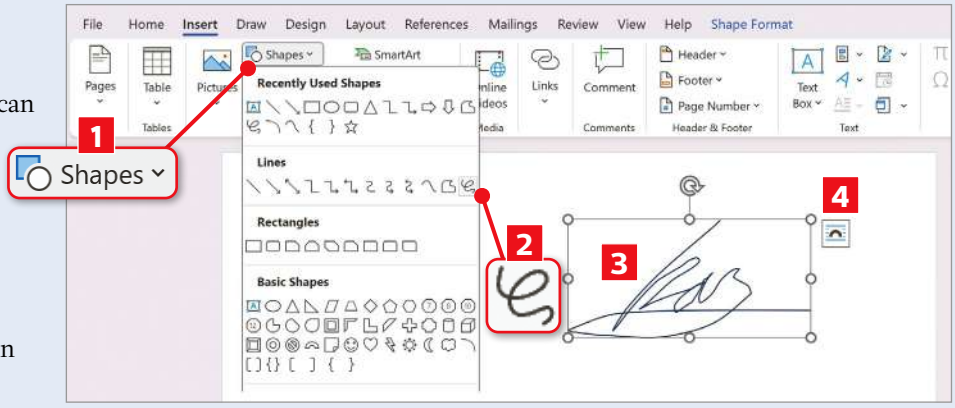


MICROSOFT WORD

'Scribble' your signature on documents

Signing a document in Microsoft Word is not easy. One option is to print your document, sign it with a pen, then scan it back into your PC. But another option is to sign it by drawing your signature, which you can then move around, or copy and paste, just like any other image.

First, click Insert from the toolbar, then Shapes (1 in our screenshot). Next, choose 'Freeform: Scribble' 2 in the Lines category. Your cursor will change into a 'plus' sign, letting you draw your signature with your mouse or trackpad. Once done 3, you can move it around like an image, or copy and paste it. Click the Layout Options icon 4 to position the signature within text, whether in line or wrapped.



LIBREOFFICE IMPRESS

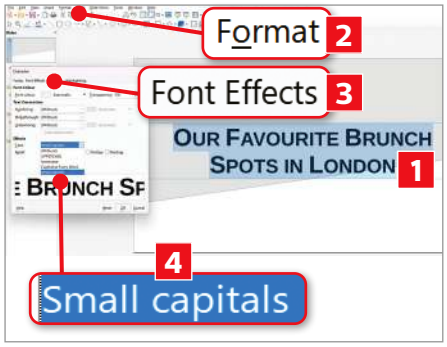
Use the Small Caps effect

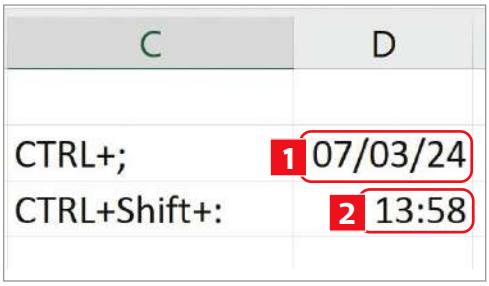
Small Caps is a text effect that capitalises words or sentences, and makes the first letter of every word larger. LibreOffice has now added this tool to Impress, its presentation tool, so you can use it in your slideshows.

It's part of LibreOffice 24.2, released in January, so check whether you're using that version. Click 'Help' at the top of any LibreOffice tool, followed by 'About LibreOffice' at the bottom of the menu. In the box that appears, look for the number after 'Version'.

If it's not 24.2 or higher, click Help again, followed by 'Check for Updates', then download any it finds.

Now open Impress, then highlight your text (1 in our screenshot below). Now click Format 2, then 'Character...' from the menu. In the box, click the Font Effects tab 3 and select 'Small capitals' 4 from the 'Case:' dropdown menu. Click OK and the text you highlighted will adopt the Small Caps effect.





MICROSOFT EXCEL

Enter date and time with keyboard shortcut

The fastest way to enter the date or time into your spreadsheet is using a keyboard shortcut. In Microsoft Excel, tap Ctrl+; (semicolon) to enter the date (1 in our screenshot above), and Ctrl+Shift+: (colon) to enter the current time 2. Both shortcuts will enter the current time and date using the format you've set in Windows. For us, that's DD/MM/YY for the date, and the 24-hour clock for the time. These shortcuts also work for LibreOffice Calc and OnlyOffice.

ONLYOFFICE

Complete number sequences quickly

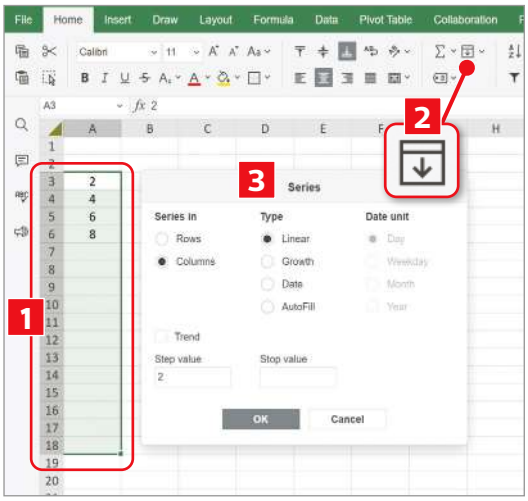
The latest version of OnlyOffice (8.0) adds a Fill Series tool to its spreadsheet editor to let you complete a sequence of numbers, or quickly fill cells with the same number.

In our example, we created a basic sequence starting from A3 to A6 that increases in steps of two (1 in our screenshot below).

We highlighted cells A3 to A18 because we want the sequence to continue in this range. We then clicked the Fill Series icon 2, then clicked Series in the dropdown menu.

In the box, OnlyOffice will try to guess the sequence you're creating, and suggest pre-selected options 3.

The simpler your sequence, the more likely OnlyOffice will suggest the correct option. Our sequence is very simple, so OnlyOffice guessed it correctly – and we just had to click OK to apply its suggestions. Doing this completed our sequence down to cell A18. If the suggestions aren't right, simply change them.



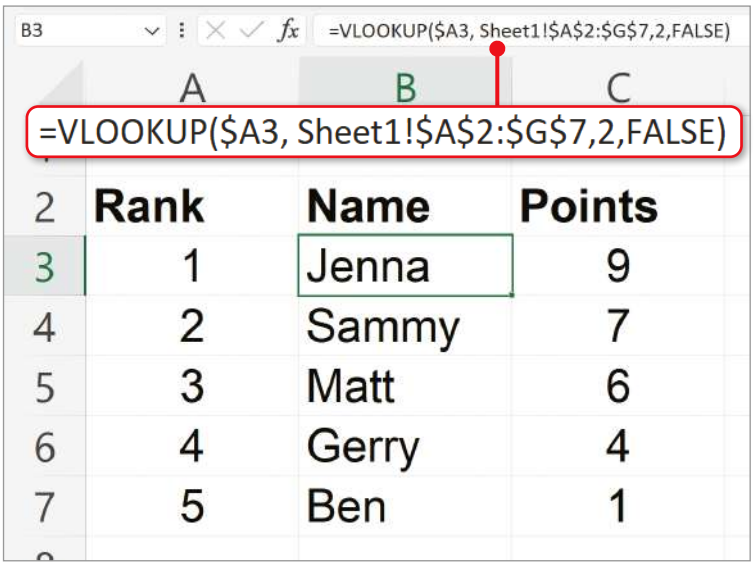
In The Club

Run a club or society? Here's how your tech can make it easier

Create a spreadsheet leaderboard

If you run a club that involves members competing against each other, you can create a spreadsheet leaderboard that updates automatically.

You first use the RANK function to create a table containing names and scores, then a second table linked to it using the VLOOKUP function. This second table takes the points from the first to update your leaderboard. We'll use Excel here, but our instructions also work in LibreOffice Calc and OnlyOffice.



Use the VLOOKUP function to pull in names and points from your first sheet

Build your source table

First, create a simple table showing the points scored by each player. We chose three for a win, one for a draw, and zero for a defeat. Leave the Rank column blank. This is the 'source' data that your second table will use to update the leaderboard.

To show a player's position, enter a RANK formula in the Rank column of your first table. To do this, we typed =RANK(C3,C$3:C$7,0) into cell A3 (1 in our screenshot below). C3 here refers to the cell we want to use to rank. In our table, C3 shows the number of points Ben has accumulated 2.

The range C$3:C$7 refers to the column containing the points from other players. Using $ means that as we copy and paste the formula into other cells in the A column, the C3:C7 range won't change. To do this, we click A3 and press Ctrl+C to copy. Now we highlight cells A4 to A7 and click Ctrl+V to paste the formula into them.

The final number in the formula can either be 0 or 1. The former ranks the data in descending order, so the first-ranked entry is the highest number; the latter does the opposite.

Once you've pasted the function into cells A4 to A7, press Enter and the Rank column will be updated. In our example, it shows Jenna ranked 1, despite being placed in the middle of column B.

Create a second table that updates

Now click the plus (+) sign at the bottom of your spreadsheet to create a new sheet. This is where you'll make the table that will be automatically updated, pulling in data from the first sheet. In our example, we only need columns for rank, name and points. We fill in the A column manually with ranks from 1 to 5, with Jenna at the top.

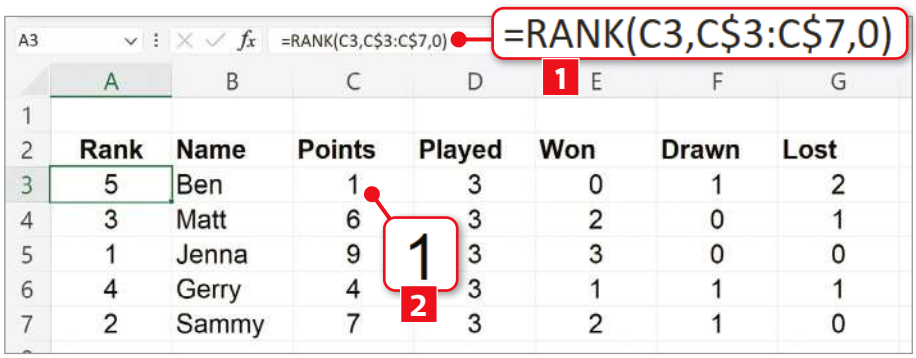
In cell B3 enter the formula =VLOOKUP($A3,Sheet1!$A$2:$G$7,2,FALSE) – see screenshot above. To explain what this does, we'll start with cell A3, which shows '1' – Jenna's position in the leaderboard. Next, we reference the cells A2:G7 from our first table in Sheet 1. We then enter 2 because we are looking to pull name data from the second column in that table.

We end the formula with FALSE because we want an exact match. Again, we use $ signs throughout because we are looking to fix the references as we copy and paste our formula into other cells.

Click B3 and tap Ctrl+C to copy, then highlight the remaining cells in the B column and tap Ctrl+V to paste.

You must now enter a formula to make the second sheet pull in the data from the points column in the first sheet. For us, that means clicking in cell C3 and entering =VLOOKUP($A3,Sheet1!$A$2:$G$7,3,FALSE). The only change to the previous VLOOKUP formula is 3 because the points in the first sheet are in the third column. Again, copy and paste the formula into the rest of the column.

Once that's set up, whenever you update the points tally in the first table, it will be updated in the second – and the names will move up and down to show their new positions.



Use the RANK function to create your source table

Next issue: Make voice notes during meetings

What's All the

Fuss About...

Speedometer 3.0

Take this updated benchmark test to see which browser is fastest

What is it?

The latest version of a tool that tests how fast and responsive browsers are. It does this by rapidly running through tasks that simulate how users interact with websites, and giving a score at the end.

How do I try it?

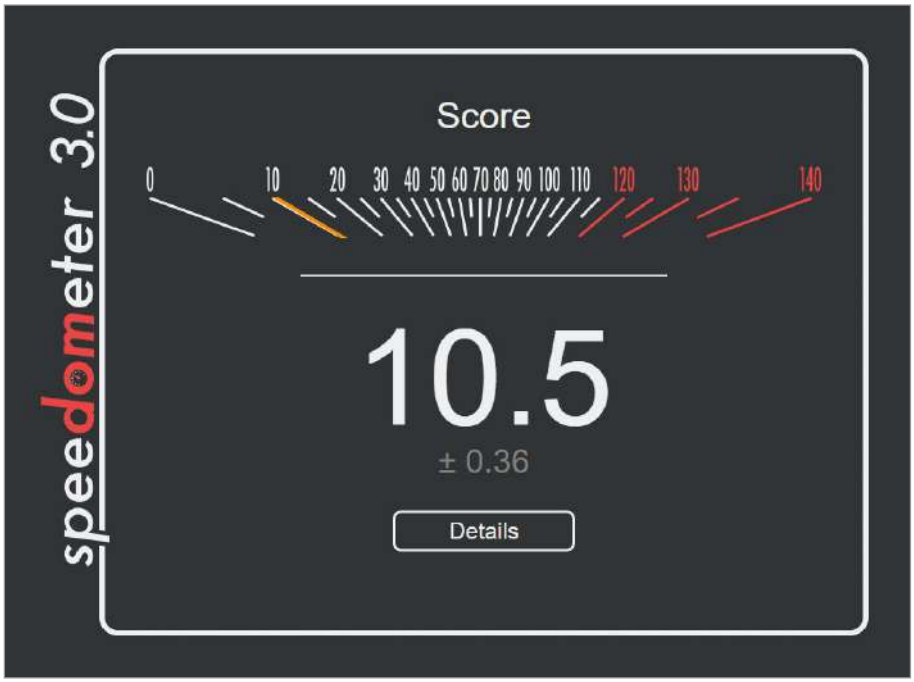
By opening a browser, then visiting www.snipca.com/49738 and clicking Start Test. But before you do, make sure you're running the latest version of the browser, and close any programs you have open and any other tabs on your browser. Also, if you're using a laptop, plug it in so it's charging. And while the test is running, don't do anything on your computer.

Crikey – is all that really necessary?

It is if you want to get accurate results. Ideally, you should also remove any extensions you have, because they can "have a large impact on the score", though we wouldn't blame you for thinking that's too much hassle. Once the test starts, you'll see it search the web, click buttons, open menus and more. All this happens inside a box on Speedometer's website, so you'll never actually leave that page.

And it's the same test no matter which browser you use?

Yes. Speedometer is a benchmarking tool, which means it always runs the same test, and applies the same criteria when assessing the score. We perform our own benchmark tests when reviewing devices to calculate specifications such as processor speed, battery life and frame rates. Without benchmarking, it would be impossible to test devices or software with any consistency.



What's new in Speedometer 3.0?

The latest version updates the existing tests, and adds more that better emulate what people do online, including creating a to-do list, editing text and code, creating SVG charts and reading news sites (see www.snipca.com/49739). It also more precisely measures rendering, which is how long the browsers take to interpret the HTML, CSS and JavaScript code they need to display a web page correctly. But the biggest change with 3.0 is that Microsoft (which makes Edge) and Mozilla (Firefox) have worked on it. Speedometer 1.0, released in 2014, was made solely by Apple (Safari), while Google (Chrome) joined for version 2.0 four years later. With all four major browsers now on board, the test is much more reliable.

How long does the test take?

A couple of minutes. Its progress is marked by white lines that appear along the bottom of the test window, and by a number ticker counting up to 580.

What counts as a good result?

It's all relative, and scores will vary depending on your computer's processing power. But as long as you test each browser on the same machine, you'll get useful results that you can compare. When we ran Speedometer 3.0, Brave was fastest, scoring 10.5 (see screenshot above), followed by Edge and Firefox (see box below). At the bottom of the pile was Chrome.

So why is it still the world's most popular browser?

That's down to Google's global brand recognition. It replaced Internet Explorer as number one in 2012 when it was a faster and more innovative option, and its market share has hovered at around 65 per cent since 2017. By contrast, Brave has just one per cent. Still, while it may never be bigger than Chrome, at least it would beat it in the browsers' race on sports day.

Browser scores on Speedometer 3.0

Brave	Edge	Firefox	Opera	Vivaldi	Chrome
10.5	9.81	9.31	8.93	7.15	6.95

BEST NEW FREE APPS You'll NEVER Stop Using

Don't waste your time and storage on installing rubbish, ad-stuffed mobile apps. **Robert Irvine** recommends 25 of the most useful free tools for your phone and tablet

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Stream and download thousands of radio stations and podcasts
- Use a free photo editor that doesn't charge for premium tools
- Edit and sign PDF documents directly on your mobile device
- Share files instantly between your Android and iOS devices
- Download maps of entire countries to explore offline for free
- Encrypt your mobile internet connection with a single tap
- Compare your phone's processing power with similar devices

The news that Microsoft is ditching the option to install Android apps in Windows 11 (see page 9) is neither surprising nor disappointing, partly because we use software differently on our PCs and mobile devices.

Free programs you download to your desktop can be tested once and then forgotten about – provided they don't misbehave in the background. But the more limited storage and smaller screen space on your phone or tablet mean every app needs to count, and superfluous tools can be a nuisance, especially when you tap them accidentally and they open full screen.

For this reason, most of us uninstall Android and iOS apps we don't like within minutes of trying them. They might be free, but there's no point hanging on to apps you'll never use again at the expense of valuable space on your device.

To save you the trouble of installing and removing rubbish apps, we've tested hundreds of new and updated tools in the Apple App Store and Google Play Store to bring you the cream of the crop.

To refine our selection, we've focused on apps that are completely free to use, don't lock premium features behind paid-for subscriptions and are free of annoying adverts.

We've avoided all the obvious choices that you probably use already so we can bring you 25 fantastic tools you may not have heard of, but won't regret downloading.

AUDIO, PHOTO & VIDEO APPS

Audials Play

Android www.snipca.com/49631
iOS www.snipca.com/49632

Licensing restrictions in the UK limit the number of international stations you can listen to in radio-streaming apps, and the BBC now prevents third-party services from including its stations – encouraging you to use its BBC Sounds service instead.

So thank goodness for Audials Play, which delivers an enormous choice of audio entertainment for free – and with no ads littering its layout. It features more than 3,600 UK radio stations (see screenshot below), combining well-known names such as Heart, Classic FM, Absolute Radio, Virgin Radio and Radio Caroline with more obscure channels.

To access international radio, Audials suggests you go into its Settings, select 'Located in United Kingdom' then tap No when asked if you're in the UK. You can browse by country, genre or broadcaster, and tap to stream instantly in the app – with no account required, unless you want to save your favourite stations. It also lets you listen to podcasts from around the world.

Audials Play lets you tune into thousands of UK and global radio stations for free

AntennaPod

Android www.snipca.com/49637

Following the closure of Google Podcasts, AntennaPod is one of the best free ways to listen to millions of podcasts, with no adverts or premium-only features and content.

Subscribe to millions of podcasts for free using AntennaPod

Its speedy search tool and minimalist interface make it easy to find podcasts (including BBC shows), subscribe with a single tap (see screenshot above) and either stream episodes instantly, download them to play offline or add them to a queue to listen to later.

Handy features include a sleep timer, which you can reset by shaking your device, the ability to skip silences automatically and a new 'volume adaptation' option that either increases or decreases the volume level of specific podcasts, depending on how quiet or raucous they are.

Musicolet

Android www.snipca.com/49640

Although Spotify lets you play music stored on your phone, as well as via its streaming service, that also means dealing with Spotify's slow and bloated app. A much better idea is to listen to your own tunes through Musicolet, an ad-free, lightweight and feature-packed player for offline audio files.

It scans your device to import tracks in MP3, WMA, AAC and most other audio file formats, then lets you add them to playlists, edit their information and set one as your ringtone.

You can also adjust a song's playback speed and pitch, achieve the right sound balance using the graphic equaliser and use the 'Audio cutter' (see screenshot below left) to trim the beginning and end of tracks. Musicolet does have a paid-for Pro version, but the option is tucked away and there are more than enough tools to play with for free.

Musicolet is packed with useful tools including an 'Audio cutter'

Image Toolbox

Android www.snipca.com/49626

Many 'free' image-editing apps lock useful features behind Upgrade buttons (especially on iOS) and crowd their interfaces with irritating ads, but Image Toolbox is a refreshing exception.

It has more features than you get in most paid-for apps, yet it's fast and easy to use, and free of restrictions and distractions. Tap the Edit tab to access options for resizing and cropping photos, and converting them to different image formats, without sacrificing their quality.

But it's the Create tab (see screenshot below) that really impresses, with more than 160 filters and effects to apply to your pictures, and useful tools for removing backgrounds; adding watermarks and annotations; stitching multiple shots into a big one; removing EXIF data; and much more.

Further options are available on the Tools tab, including extracting text from images using OCR, converting them into GIFs and saving them as PDFs.

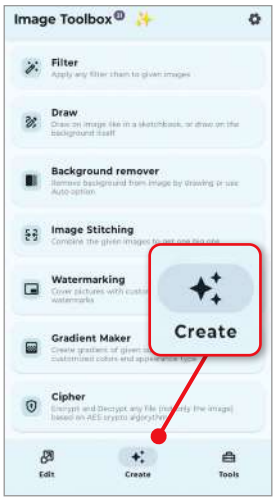
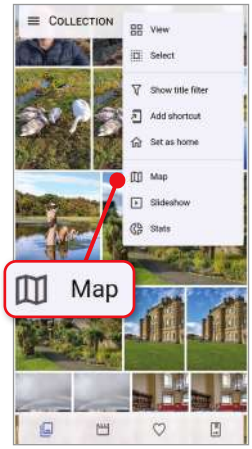


Image Toolbox is like a Swiss army knife of free image-editing apps

Aves Gallery

Android www.snipca.com/49629

Ditch Google Photos and browse images and videos stored on your Android device using this simpler and slicker alternative. Aves Gallery lets you swipe through and search your photos with ease, and select shots to share, mark as favourites and delete. Open its full menu to rename, convert and print files, edit their metadata and move them into albums.



Browse all your photos and videos much faster using Aves Gallery

As well as seeing when pictures were taken, you can choose Map in the top-right corner of the gallery (see screenshot below left) to view *where* they were taken, and select Stats to discover your most-photographed places. Other options let you switch between browsing photos, screenshots and videos, and customise the layout, but otherwise the app is a fuss-free and ad-free way to peruse your photo library.

Capture professional-looking videos for free with Blackmagic Camera

Blackmagic Camera

iOS www.snipca.com/49630

From the makers of the powerful free video-editing software DaVinci Resolve, Blackmagic Camera lets you capture more professional-looking videos on your iPhone's camera (it's not available for iPad). It adds digital film controls and image processing to give your movies a cinematic look, and lets you adjust settings such as frame rate, shutter angle, white balance and ISO by tapping the relevant controls. You can also monitor the recording levels of your iPhone's internal microphone using the on-screen audio meters (see screenshot above). Videos can be captured in 16:9 or vertical aspect ratios, and either saved to your phone or uploaded to Blackmagic's online-storage service. With its wealth of high-end features and impressive quality, Blackmagic Camera is the sort of app you'd usually pay a hefty subscription for, so it's remarkable that it's free.

OFFICE & EMAIL APPS

LibreOffice Viewer

Android www.snipca.com/49643

LibreOffice abandoned its Android app in 2020 due to "lack of maintenance", but earlier this year it reappeared in the Google Play Store, with more than 200 improvements – though these haven't yet increased its average user rating.

The revamped app works in the same way as the desktop office suite, which means you can open Word, Excel and PowerPoint files, as well as files in Open Document Format (ODT, ODS and ODP), print them from your mobile device and export them as PDFs (see screenshot below left).

Open and save documents on your phone or tablet with LibreOffice Viewer

To edit files, go into the app's Settings and enable Experimental Mode to try the feature "at your own risk". Alternatively, install Collabora Office (www.snipca.com/49644), which is based on LibreOffice and lets you edit files on Android and iOS devices.

K-9 Mail

Android www.snipca.com/49645

Mozilla is still working on a mobile version of Thunderbird, but in the meantime you can install K-9 Mail, which will eventually evolve into the Thunderbird app for Android.

It recently improved the account-setup process to let you import your messages from Gmail, Outlook and other email providers. These are combined in a unified inbox (see screenshot above), where you can read them without seeing ads or being tracked by the senders. K-9 Mail also supports OpenPGP end-to-end encryption to secure your messages in transit.

Mozilla says it's working on an iOS version of Thunderbird, but don't expect it anytime soon.

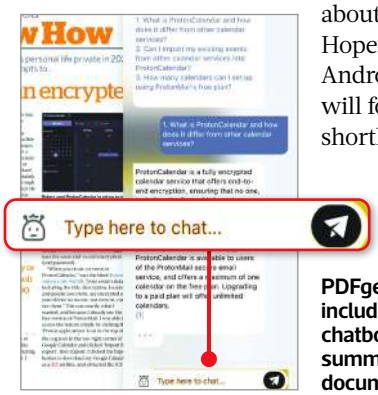
K-9 Mail provides a unified inbox for emails from different providers

PDFgear

iOS www.snipca.com/49646

Our favourite free PDF software launched its iOS app last summer, and it's almost as good as the desktop version – with no ads or in-app purchases. As well as viewing PDFs on your iPhone or iPad, you can edit and annotate their content, and rearrange and remove pages. Your device's touchscreen makes it easier to zoom into documents and sign forms than on your PC, and edited files can be saved directly to iCloud.

The app also includes PDFgear's AI chatbot (see screenshot below), which summarises PDFs and answers questions about them. Hopefully an Android app will follow shortly.



PDFgear's app includes an AI chatbot that summarises documents

BROWSING & NETWORKING APPS

DuckDuckGo Private Browser

Android www.snipca.com/49599
iOS www.snipca.com/49600

The launch of DuckDuckGo's desktop browser last June hasn't led to the company neglecting its mobile app, which it has continued to update with useful privacy tools.

The App Tracking Protection feature in the Android browser has now exited beta and expanded its 'blocklist' to block even more hidden trackers in other apps. Select the option in the app's Settings (1 in our screenshot below) and DuckDuckGo will tell you all the tracking attempts it has blocked 2. Both the Android and iOS browsers now hide cookie-consent pop-ups, provide widgets that let you search from your home screen and sync your passwords securely across devices – see our Easy When You Know How column in Issue 679 (page 74).

DuckDuckGo's App Tracking Protection blocks hidden trackers in other apps

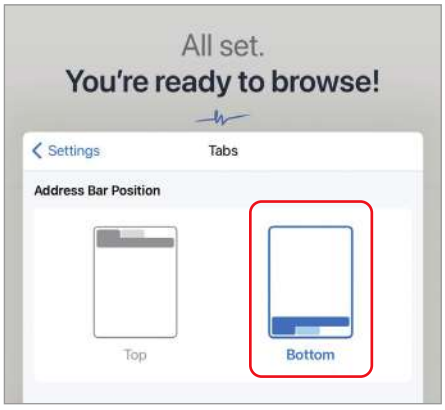
Additionally, DuckDuckGo has brought its Private Voice Search feature to more Android devices – check if you have this in the app's Accessibility settings.

Vivaldi Browser

Android www.snipca.com/49603
iOS www.snipca.com/49604

The long-awaited iOS version of Vivaldi was finally released last September, letting you use the customisable browser on your iPhone or iPad. It offers most of the same features as the Android app, including a built-in ad and tracker blocker, 'speed dials' for your favourite websites, options for making notes while browsing and saving pages to read later, and lots of ways to tailor the browser to suit your needs.

These include moving Vivaldi's address bar from top of your screen to the bottom if that's more convenient to access – especially with one hand. On Android, tap the menu button, choose Settings and switch on 'Address Bar at Bottom'; on iOS, tap Tabs in Settings and select Bottom (see screenshot above). Vivaldi has also expanded its Sync feature to sync your entire browsing history across devices, and the Android app now lets you set different default search engines for standard and private browsing modes.

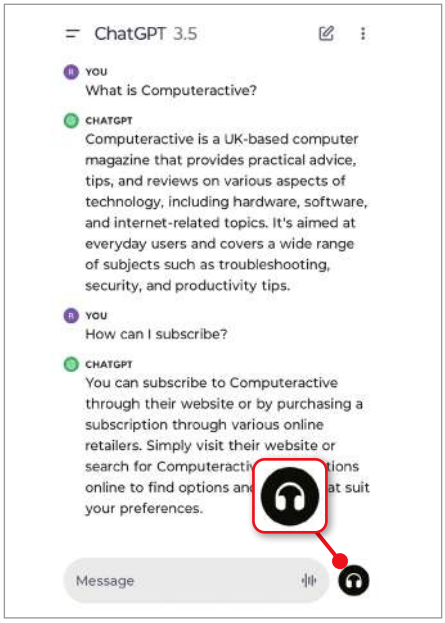


Vivaldi's app now lets you move your address bar to the bottom of the screen

ChatGPT

Android www.snipca.com/49601
iOS www.snipca.com/49602

There are lots of fake ChatGPT apps in the Google Play Store and Apple App Store, so to try the official version of the AI tool, from its developer OpenAI, make sure you use the links we've provided.



The ChatGPT app offers a simple way to interact with AI on your mobile device

Launched on iOS last May and on Android in July, the ChatGPT app benefits from a minimalist, ad-free interface that doesn't bamboozle you with suggestions and options like Microsoft's rival Copilot tool. Simply ask a question or enter a text prompt to get a detailed answer or generate content, almost instantly.

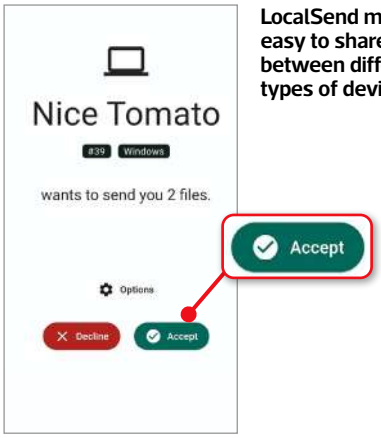
You can also use the Voice mode that was introduced for all ChatGPT users last September, which lets you engage the chatbot in conversation. Tap the headphones icon next to the text box (see screenshot below left) to choose a voice and start talking. Note that the free version of ChatGPT can't access real-time information, but it doesn't nag you to upgrade to the paid-for Plus plan.

LocalSend

Android www.snipca.com/49613
iOS www.snipca.com/49614

Although you can share files between Android devices using Quick Share (formerly Nearby Share) and between iOS devices using AirDrop, it's less easy to share them between the two operating systems. LocalSend solves this problem by letting you send files from one device to another, as well as to your PC or Mac, directly over your Wi-Fi network without needing an intermediary service or Bluetooth (which can be unreliable).

Simply install the app on the relevant devices, grant it permission to find other devices on your network – which are assigned food-related names - and select the files to send. You don't need to create an account or enter a code, and receiving sent files is as easy as tapping Accept (see screenshot below). See our Workshop in Issue 673 (get it from www.snipca.com/49615) for more on LocalSend.



LocalSend makes it easy to share files between different types of devices

WiFiman

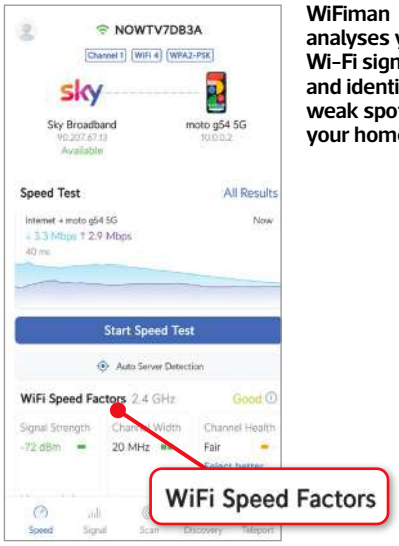
Android www.snipca.com/49608
iOS www.snipca.com/49609

WiFiman scans your Wi-Fi network to tell you the precise signal strength your mobile device is receiving from your router, in dBm (decibel milliwatts).

Its many options include a one-tap test of your download and upload speeds, an overview of all active networks in your vicinity and a list of all the devices connected to your Wi-Fi – and within your Bluetooth range.

A recent update introduced a useful feature called WiFi Speed Factors (see screenshot right), which indicates why your signal may be weak - such as a congested wireless channel.

The Android version of WiFiman lets you create a heatmap of your home that shows the signal strength in different rooms. Tap the Signal tab then Floor Plan and press Request Camera Permission. Select 'While using the app', then Create New Scan and wander around your home to generate the heatmap. Tap 'Done' to save the result.



WiFiman analyses your Wi-Fi signal and identifies weak spots in your home

1.1.1.1

Android www.snipca.com/49624
iOS www.snipca.com/49625

Cloudflare's 1.1.1.1 app protects your privacy when you're browsing on your mobile device by switching your DNS server and encrypting your internet traffic through its WARP service. Flick the switch on to connect to WARP (see screenshot above right) and install a VPN profile that will stop anyone – including your mobile network – spying on what you're doing online.

If you have problems connecting to a site or app, you can pause or disable WARP, or switch to DNS-only mode. Although the app features an option to upgrade to WARP+ for £3.99 a month, which can speed up your private browsing, the free version will be fast enough for most users.

Cloudflare's 1.1.1.1 app lets you browse more privately on your mobile device

Computer active READER OFFER!

Buy Windows 11 Pro for just £79.99!

ADD A DISC FOR £5.95

In this special offer you can buy **Windows 11 Pro** for just £79.99 – that's £140 cheaper than Microsoft's full price of £219.99.

To buy **Windows 11 Pro**, visit **www.snipca.com/41588** and click the red Buy Now button on the right.

JUST SO YOU KNOW...

This offer can be used by one person only, and expires at midnight on **9 April, 2024**. It's a lifetime licence for one computer.

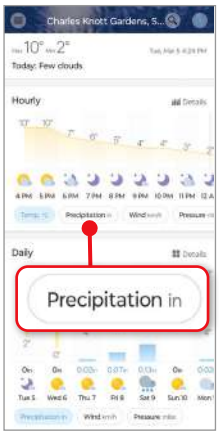
WEATHER & NAVIGATION APPS

Weather & Widget

Android www.snipca.com/49581
iOS www.snipca.com/49584

'Weather & Widget' packs a huge amount of useful meteorological information into an attractive, easy-to-understand interface. Its hourly and daily forecasts include actual and feels-like temperatures, precipitation (see screenshot below), wind speed, pressure, humidity and air quality, plus sun and moon times, weather maps and graphs, and photos that reflect current conditions.

Unlike rival weather apps, there are no ads or in-app purchases – aside from an option to donate to the developer – and its information is reliable and regularly updated for your detected location.



'Weather & Widget' presents lots of useful weather data in a customisable interface

As its name suggests, the app comes with a choice of widgets, which let you access its data directly from your home screen. Now offering even more ways to customise its layout, it's no wonder 'Weather & Widget' has a near-perfect rating on the Google Play Store and Apple App Store.

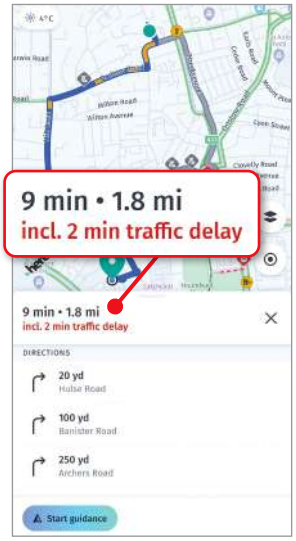
Here WeGo Maps & Navigation

Android www.snipca.com/49587
iOS www.snipca.com/49588

This popular free alternative to Google Maps offers the useful option to download maps of whole countries to explore offline, provided you have enough space on your device. It provides door-to-door directions for driving, cycling, walking and public transport, in written, spoken and map format, and tells you the distance, journey length and estimated time of arrival.

Enable Here WeGo's traffic features to get driving guidance, including details of speed limits and cameras, and live traffic updates (see screenshot below).

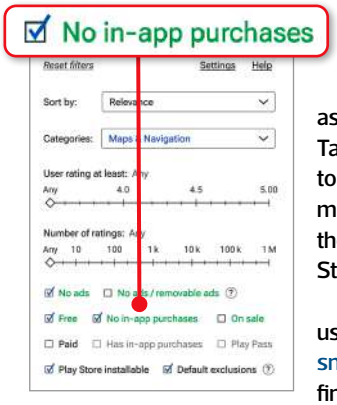
New features in the app include 'visual references' to landmarks so you know you're on the right road, an updated Terrain layer that shows topographical features such as steep hills, and the ability to plan your route with multiple stops.



Here WeGo Maps provides detailed directions and maps, and live traffic updates

Find free apps with NO in-app purchases

The Apple App Store helpfully tells you if a free app contains in-app purchases (IAPs) below its name at the top of the page, then reveals what those purchases are – and how much they cost – in the Information section at the bottom. In contrast, the Google Play Store merely states 'In app purchases' and leaves it to the app's developer to provide more details (frustratingly, most don't bother).



You can quickly find free Android apps with no ads or in-app purchases using App Finder (www.snipca.com/49655). Enter a keyword, select a category and tick the boxes 'No ads', 'Free' and 'No in-app purchases' (see screenshot), as well as 'Play Store installable'. Tap the results link at the top of the screen to browse matching apps and install them through the Play Store.

For iOS apps, you can use AppRaven (www.snipca.com/49653) to find apps with no IAPs. Tap the Menu tab, choose App Filter and select Price then Free. Tap 'Done', swipe down to 'In-app purchases' and choose No. Press 'Apply', then tap 'Search by Tag' and select a category of apps to browse, such as Camera, Music or No Ads.

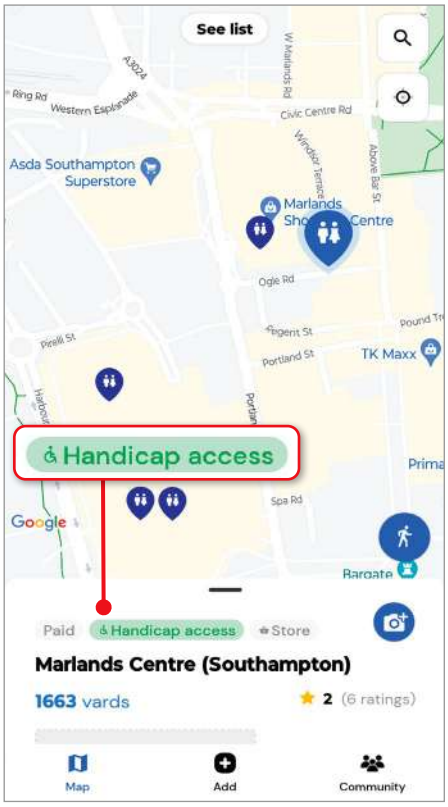
Toilet Finder

Android www.snipca.com/49596
iOS www.snipca.com/49597

This handy app helps you quickly find the nearest toilet when you're out and about. It automatically detects your location, or you can search for a place, to view public conveniences marked on a map. Tap one to discover how far away it is, then press the Route button to view step-by-step directions.

Toilet Finder also tells you whether a toilet is free to use, has disabled access (see screenshot above right) and is located in a shop or restaurant, as well as providing user ratings.

Updated last year with options for adding opening times and photos to its listings (though we can't see any examples yet), it now claims to cover more than 150,000 toilets worldwide. If you don't mind ads, you can also try the similar app Flush (www.snipca.com/49598), though this hasn't been updated for a while.



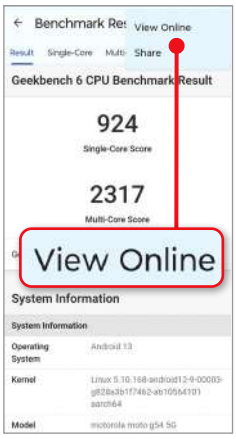
Toilet Finder tells you where the nearest loos are and if they're accessible

ESSENTIAL TOOLS FOR YOUR PHONE & TABLET

Geekbench

Android www.snipca.com/49605
iOS www.snipca.com/49606

When this benchmarking tool redesigned its mobile app last year, many users were annoyed that it had ditched two of the most useful features. Although you could still test the CPU and GPU of your phone or tablet, it was no longer possible to compare the results with similar devices or to monitor your device's performance over time.



Geekbench tests your mobile device's CPU and GPU and compares the results with others

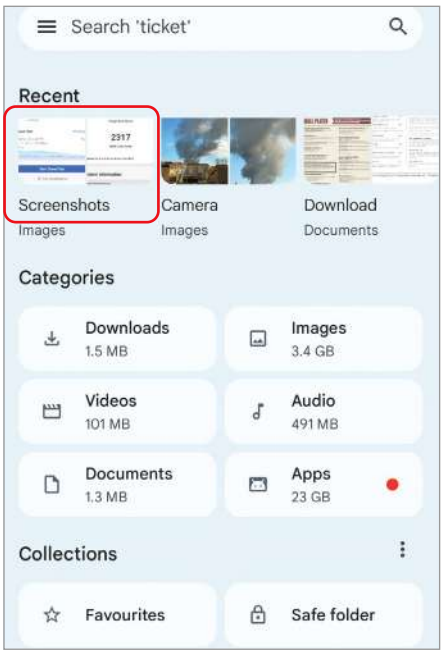
Thankfully, Geekbench saw sense and restored both options a few months later. Tap the CPU tab to run a thorough test of your processor and get single and multi-core scores and a detailed breakdown of the results. Press the three-dot icon in the top-right corner and choose View Online (see screenshot above) to open the Geekbench Browser and see other users' benchmark scores. When you next run a CPU or GPU test, check the previous results by opening the menu in the top-left corner and choosing History.

Files by Google

Android www.snipca.com/49612

Don't install a dodgy file manager from the Google Play Store – use Google's own free app to browse and organise all the photos, videos, documents and other files stored on your Android device and SD card.

Recently redesigned, the fantastic Files makes it easy to find specific types of file and free up storage by deleting duplicate items, old screenshots (see screenshot below left), forgotten downloads and other junk. Just tap the three-line menu button and select Clean to view and accept its removal suggestions. It also includes an app manager, which lets you uninstall large and unused apps and games; a 'Safe folder' for protecting sensitive files with a PIN or screen-lock pattern; and the new ability to scan and save documents directly in the app (see page 44).



'Files by Google' lets you easily remove junk files from your Android device

All In One Smart Tools

Android www.snipca.com/49660
iOS www.snipca.com/49616

Most free 'utility' apps are crammed with ads and in-app purchases, but All In One Smart Tools has neither and gathers lots of useful features in one place.

All In One Smart Tools gives you one-tap access to 12 useful features

These include a stopwatch and timer, basic compass, torch, QR code and barcode scanner, and dictionary. We particularly like the Units Converter (see screenshot above), which lets you quickly convert everything from angles, lengths and masses to energy, speed and temperature (though the currency converter doesn't seem to work). There's also a handy Device Info button you can tap to check your device's model, system version and available storage. Our only gripe is that the Tip Calculator uses US dollars.

HWExplore

Android www.snipca.com/49619
iOS www.snipca.com/49620

HWExplore (short for HumanWare Explore Magnifier) is a simple but powerful magnifying tool for your phone or tablet, without the ads and trackers that plague rival apps. Drag the slider or use the plus and minus icons to zoom in on small text and tiny details, up to a magnification level of x8. Tap the camera icon to take a screenshot, or press pause (see screenshot above right) to 'freeze' the image when you need a stable view. HWExplore also lets you activate your device's torch when you're reading in low-lit conditions.

Is it safe to 'sideload' mobile apps?

All the apps recommended in this feature are available in the Apple App Store and Google Play Store, and traditionally we've advised sticking to those sources, to keep your phone and tablet safe from malware. But things are changing, and Apple and Google are both, albeit reluctantly, making it easier to install apps from alternative app stores – a process known as 'sideloading'.

Following an EU regulatory ruling called the Digital Markets Act, Apple is now required to allow third-party stores on iPhones and iPads, starting with the just-released iOS 17.4. This currently only applies in the EU, but it's possible the option will eventually come to the UK, if the Government's 'Digital Markets, Competitions and Consumer Bill' forces Apple to comply. Until then, you can only sideload apps by jailbreaking your device, which may have a detrimental effect on its security and performance.

Google already lets you sideload apps on your Android device, but as part of a recent legal settlement, it will soon tone down the language it uses to warn you about using third-party app stores (see www.snipca.com/49650).

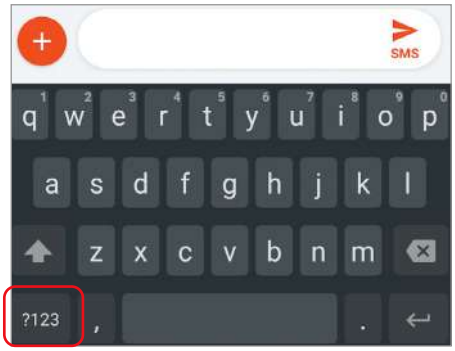
Safe sources, which vet all the apps they offer for malicious content, include APKMirror (www.apkmirror.com) and F-Droid (www.snipca.com/49651), where you'll find tools not available in the Play Store, such as the ad-free YouTube front-end NewPipe.

Magnify small text and fine details using HWExplore

Simple Keyboard

www.snipca.com/49622

The most widely used keyboard apps – Gboard and SwiftKey – are now cluttered with unnecessary options such as emojis, GIFs and AI tools, which hinder rather than help your typing. Simple Keyboard is designed for Android users who "only need a keyboard and nothing more", rejecting gimmicky tools in favour of large keys and a streamlined, ad-free interface. You can access the numerical/punctuation keyboard by tapping the button in the bottom left (see screenshot above right), switch to a dark theme in the app's Preferences, and still use emojis in WhatsApp and other messaging apps through their own keyboards. Follow the instructions on Simple Keyboard's Play Store page to set it as your default keyboard.



Simple Keyboard removes gimmicky features for those who just want to type

APPS THAT SAVE YOU MONEY

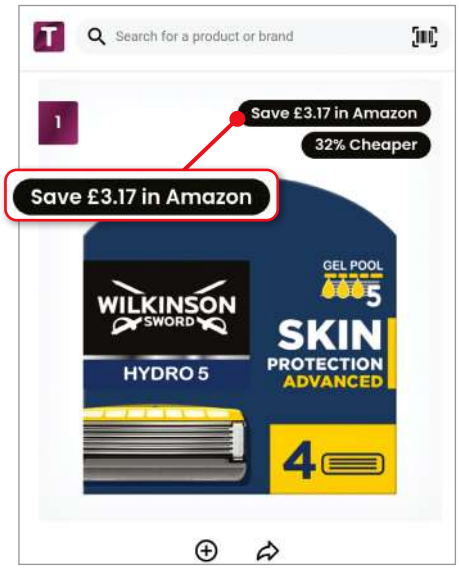
Trolley.co.uk

Android www.snipca.com/49592
iOS www.snipca.com/49593

Trolley.co.uk saves you money on your weekly shop by letting you compare the cost of groceries and household items at all the main UK supermarkets (except Lidl) and high-street stores including Boots, Superdrug, B&M and Home Bargains.

It nearly closed in 2022 because of 'licensing issues', but was saved by public donations and since then has gone from strength to strength. As well as revealing the cheapest places to buy specific products, it provides price-history data and customer reviews, rounds up the best daily deals, and lets you scan barcodes to compare prices faster.

Sign up for a free account to save items to a shopping list, receive price-drop alerts and use the new Share option to share bargains with other people. Trolley.co.uk recently added Amazon (see screenshot left) and eBay to its results, so you can find discounts online, too.



Trolley.co.uk now compares prices on Amazon as well as at supermarkets

MoneySavingExpert

Android www.snipca.com/49594
iOS www.snipca.com/49595

The MoneySavingExpert (MSE) app lets you browse all the money-saving articles and news stories from Martin Lewis' popular website, as well as the weekly email, in an easy-to-navigate layout. Particularly useful is the Tools tab, which provides speedy access to MSE's Credit Club (for checking your credit score), broadband comparison tool and calculators for credit cards, loans, savings goals, mortgage repayments and more.

Last year, the app introduced its own AI assistant, MSE ChatGPT (see screenshot above), which answers your financial questions using information from MSE's guides. It also improved the Bill Buster tool, which alerts you when cheaper internet and mobile deals become available, by letting you use it without linking your bank account. ca

The MSE app provides lots of money-saving help and has its own chatbot

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Switch to mobile broadband

Save money by ditching your current internet plan for a cheaper, more flexible option. **Robert Irvine** explains the benefits and drawbacks of 4G and 5G home broadband

Why you should switch to mobile broadband

It can be cheaper than traditional broadband

The main reason to ditch your fibre or cable connection in favour of 4G or 5G broadband is that it will save you money. According to Uswitch, the average cost of traditional home broadband in the UK is around £27 a month (see www.snipca.com/49680), but you also need to factor in annual price rises, setup charges and the cost of line rental (for ADSL and FTTC plans), plus an exit fee if you end your contract early.

In contrast, some mobile-broadband plans don't charge you anything upfront – neither for the equipment they send you or for setup. Three's excellent-value 4G and 5G Home Broadband plans (www.snipca.com/49692, pictured below) cost £22 a month for unlimited data, discounted to only £11 for the first six months of a two-year contract.

Pay just £11 a month for your first six months of 4G or 5G broadband with Three

Mobile broadband doesn't require installation

With mobile broadband, you don't need to wait for an engineer to install or activate your internet connection, and can set up everything yourself within minutes. The 4G or 5G provider will send you a router or hub and a SIM card, which may already be inserted in the device or you can slot it in yourself.

The SIM card receives mobile signals in the same way as the one in your phone, which the router converts into Wi-Fi. You can then set up your home network by connecting your computer and other devices to the router, either using Ethernet cables or wirelessly. Because mobile broadband doesn't require a landline, you don't need to connect the router to a phone socket or worry about the Copper Switch Off. You'll be able to make VoIP calls by plugging your home phone into the router.

You don't need to commit to a contract

You can avoid being tied to a lengthy contract with a mobile broadband provider by choosing a 30-day 'rolling' plan. These deals usually cost more per month, and may have an upfront fee, but they allow you to avoid mid-contract price hikes and termination fees, and mean you can ditch them and return to traditional broadband if 4G or 5G don't work out for you.

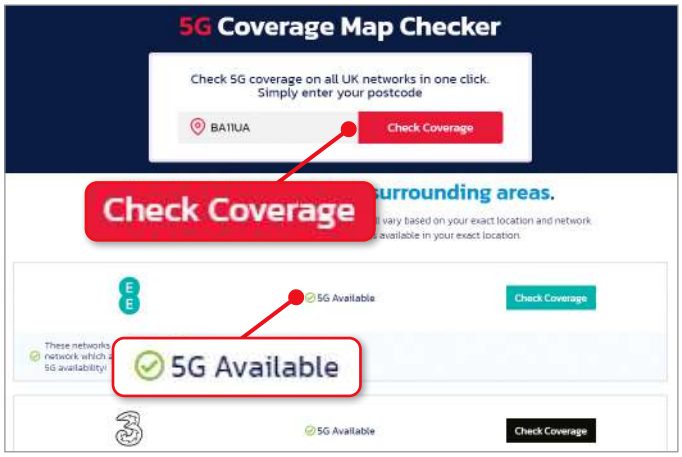
EE's Smart 4G Hub costs more a month than some fibre-broadband deals

Three offers by far the best rolling deal, at £25 a month for unlimited 4G and 5G data (www.snipca.com/49693) with no upfront cost. Vodafone's cheapest no-contract plan is for its 4G GigaCube, which costs £40 a month for 200GB of data, plus £50 upfront (www.snipca.com/49695). You can get a 5GB GigaCube for the same price, but you need to pay £175 in advance – or avoid the fee by signing up for a contract.

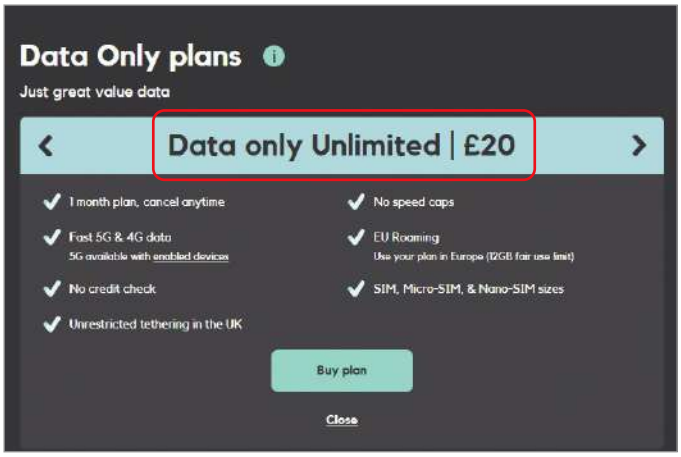
EE's Smart 4G Hub (pictured above left) is priced from £35 a month for 100GB of data, plus £150 upfront (www.snipca.com/49706), while its Smart 5G Hub (www.snipca.com/49694) costs from £45 a month, plus £100 upfront, and is only available with an 18-month contract. See the opposite page to find out how to cut the cost.

You can potentially enjoy faster speeds

A 5G connection provides you with download speeds that are faster than ADSL and standard fibre (FTTC) broadband and even some FTTP connections. But the exact speed you'll receive will be determined by your chosen provider – EE promises average 5G speeds of 146Mbps, while Three



Check which mobile networks – including virtual ones – provide 5G in your area



Mobile virtual network operators such as Smarty offer unlimited 5G data for bargain prices

claims 150Mbps – and the strength of the signal in your area.

5G is particularly useful for people in urban areas or blocks of flats who can't get a fast connection with fixed-line broadband. 4G is much slower, but more widely available and your router will default to it when it can't connect to 5G.

The latest hubs let you connect up to 64 devices, and use both the 2.4GHz and 5GHz bands, so you can share the mobile signal across all the gadgets in your home.

What are the downsides to mobile broadband?

The main problem with mobile broadband is that if you live in an area where 4G and 5G connectivity is patchy or unreliable, your internet connection will be slow and prone to drop. Mobile broadband is also more susceptible than fixed lines to environmental factors such as bad weather and network congestion.

Although 99 per cent of the UK can now get 4G from at least one operator, 5G coverage is much more limited. Recent tests found that Three offers the widest 5G availability, spanning nearly 58 per cent of the country (www.snipca.com/49689), but that doesn't mean everyone in those areas can get mobile broadband – figures are often skewed by including outdoor reception.

If 5G isn't available to your home, you may still have access to 4G – but it's best not to commit to a two-year contract in case 5G's arrival is imminent. You can sign up for updates on Three's 5G home broadband rollout at www.snipca.com/49700.

Enter your postcode at www.snipca.com/49691 (see screenshot above left) to see which networks now provide to your area and click through to their coverage checkers. Where possible, use the 5G and 'indoors and outdoors' filters to give you a more accurate idea of availability.

How to switch to mobile broadband

Because mobile broadband doesn't require a fixed line, there's no switching process involved in moving to a new provider. Just order your router or hub, and set it up as explained earlier.

You can either cancel your current broadband deal, or use it in tandem with a 4G or 5G router, if you can afford both. This effectively gives you two home networks, though to avoid interference make sure they use different Wi-Fi channels.

If the prices charged by EE and Vodafone are too expensive, you can save money by using a SIM card from a mobile virtual network operator (MVNO) such as Smarty, Lebara or iD Mobile. Ideally, the SIM should offer unlimited data, so you don't get charged extra for heavy internet use. Smarty's unlimited data-only plan costs £20 a month, with no contract (www.snipca.com/49696, see screenshot above). ID Mobile is currently offering unlimited data for £8.50 a month for the first six months of a 24-month SIM-only contract, rising to £17 afterwards (www.snipca.com/49698). Also ensure that you won't breach the MVNO's terms of service or 'fair usage policy' by using the card in a router instead of a phone.

Bear in mind that 4G and 5G routers and hubs belong to the relevant providers, not to you, and may be locked to those networks. You can buy an unlocked 4G TP-Link router with a SIM card slot from Amazon for £74 (www.snipca.com/49687), but 5G devices are a lot more expensive, such as the ZTE 5G CPE MC888 for £250 (www.snipca.com/49697). However, even when combined with the price of an unlimited-data SIM, this still works out cheaper than the annual cost of a 5G router from EE or Vodafone.

Note that you may need to adjust your router's APN (access point name) settings to make it connect to the mobile network – see www.snipca.com/49688 for details. ca

What about MiFi devices?

MiFi (mobile Wi-Fi) devices also provide a way to get online over a mobile network rather than a fibre or cable connection. They're smaller than 4G and 5G home routers and are battery-operated rather than mains-powered, which makes them easier to use on the move.

Although both types of device use SIM cards, a MiFi dongle is essentially a portable Wi-Fi hotspot, which shares its mobile signal with nearby gadgets – similar to tethering your phone. By contrast, mobile-broadband hubs have a greater Wi-Fi range, the ability to support dozens of devices simultaneously and several Ethernet ports.

All the main mobile networks provide MiFi devices – also called travel routers or mobile hotspots – but most have restrictive data plans.

One exception is the Vodafone 5G Mobile Hotspot (pictured), which offers unlimited data for £30 a month (www.snipca.com/49704). However, to replace your home broadband, you need the range and flexibility of a 5G hub or router.

DON'T BUY the wrong charger

When you need a new charger, make sure you check the watts and standard – and don't end up with a fake. **Daniel Booth** explains everything you need to know

Most of us will stick with the charger that comes with our phone, tablet or laptop. But if it stops working or you lose it, you'll need a replacement. Because many charging cables tend to look the same, it's tempting to think you can plug any charger into any device. But there are important differences to consider, and getting it wrong could wreck your device or even destroy your home.

Phones and tablets

First, check your phone's manual to see how much power it needs in watts (W). Most modern phones require between 5W and 20W. For example, our favourite Android phone – Google's Pixel 7a – needs 18W, while our favourite iPhone (13) needs 20W (see page 30 for both).

Some recent phones, particularly 'super-fast-charging' devices from Chinese manufacturers, require a much higher wattage. The current record holder is Realme's GT3, which supports 240W and can charge fully in under 10 minutes. If you can't see an entry for watts in the list of specifications, look for output in volts and amps. Multiply those two numbers together to get the wattage.

There's no harm in using a charger that has a higher wattage than your device needs. Modern devices are designed to draw only the amount of power they require. Avoid using a charger with a lower wattage, however, because your device might have to draw power from its battery rather than the charger itself. It may also overheat the device.

PPS

The word 'FAST' on this logo indicates that the charger has PPS. . .

Tablets have larger screens and more features than phones, which means they have larger batteries and need more watts to charge. Our favourite Android tablet, the Samsung Galaxy Tab S9 (see page 30), comes with a 45W charger, although the latest standard-sized iPads require only 20W.

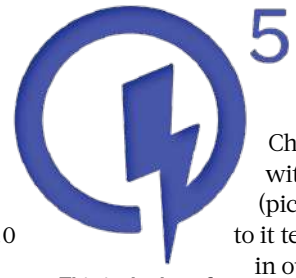
Checking that your charger uses the correct standard is harder. The most common (and best) standard is USB Power Delivery (USB PD). USB PD 3.0 cables can carry 100W, while USB PD 3.1, released in 2021, can hit 240W. Qualcomm's Quick Charge 4 (released in 2017) and 5 (2020) are compatible with USB PD.

But before you can tell which version of USB PD or Quick Charge to use, you need to find out if your device supports Programmable Power Supply (PPS) fast charging. This is an optional part of USB PD that can charge devices faster by altering the voltage and current in real time to give your device exactly the right amount of power it needs. Samsung's Galaxy S20, released in 2020, was the first phone with PPS.

NOT PPS

. . .while it's missing on this logo, which means it has USB PD but not PPS

Look for the logos (pictured above) on the device or charger, or in its manual, to help you identify whether it supports PPS. If the text says 'FAST CHARGER 80W', then it has PPS. If it just says 'CHARGER', it lacks PPS – though it's still pretty fast.



This is the logo for Qualcomm's Quick Charge 5

Qualcomm's Quick Charge logos are a Q shape with a lightning bolt inside (pictured left). The number next to it tells you which edition it is (5 in our example).

If your phone doesn't support USB PD, it will use either the manufacturer's own charging technology – such as OnePlus' Warp Charge or Xiaomi's HyperCharge – or an older standard such as Quick Charge 3 or Samsung's Adaptive Fast Charging.

Much of this is irrelevant if you own an iPhone 12, 13 or 14, because Apple forces you to use its Lightning charger and cable. That changed last year with the iPhone 15, which has a USB-C port, while

Our recommended wall and desktop chargers

BEST SINGLE-PORT WALL CHARGERS

Anker 713 Nano II (pictured),
£22 from www.snipca.com/49718.
1 USB-C port, 45W

Anker 715 Nano II
£33 from www.snipca.com/49741.
1 USB-C port, 65W

BEST MULTI-PORT WALL CHARGERS

Ugreen Nexode Pro (pictured),
£50 from www.snipca.com/49719
1 USB-A (22.5W), 2 USB-C (65W each) ports

Ugreen Nexode 140W
£100 from www.snipca.com/49742
1 USB-A (22.5W), 2 USB-C (100W, 140W)

BEST DESKTOP CHARGER

Satechi 200W (pictured),
£144 from www.snipca.com/49732
6 USB-C (2x140W, 2x100W, 2x20W) ports

iPads have been using USB-C for several years – see www.snipca.com/49722. The change means you can now use the same cable to charge iPhones and Android devices.

Also look for chargers built with modern Gallium Nitride (GaN) technology, which is replacing the older silicon because it uses energy more efficiently. It can also withstand higher temperatures, which will become increasingly important as devices require more power to charge. All the chargers we recommend above have PPS and GaN.

Laptops

Just as tablets need bigger batteries than phones, so laptops need bigger batteries than both – and that means chargers that can supply more watts. Smaller laptops typically need 35W-45W, while mid-sized models need 65W. For a larger laptop, you'll need 100W or higher.

Some laptops still come with chunky AC power bricks and barrel-shaped DC connectors. But many modern laptops also support USB-C charging – and sometimes that's the only option. These are much smaller than power bricks and work with more devices. However, only laptops that support USB PD can be charged by USB-C. As with phones, chargers that use PPS are most efficient.

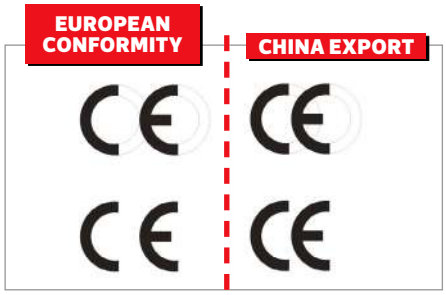
Thunderbolt is the other charging standard your laptop may support, though it's not easy to identify because the ports look identical to USB-C. While version 4 of Thunderbolt, released in 2020, transfers data faster than USB-C, it doesn't charge devices faster.

What's more, Thunderbolt is backwards-compatible with USB-C, which means you can use it with a USB-C laptop or USB-C charger. All Thunderbolt 3 and 4 cables can handle 100W of power, but some increase this to 240W.

Wall charger or desktop charger?

Once you know your device's wattage and charging standard, choose between a wall or desktop charger. The former have plug pins and connect directly to the wall power socket. They're usually small enough to fit in your pocket – choose one with pins that fold away if you need to carry it around. Desktop chargers are less portable because they sit on your desk and are separated from the socket by a power cable. They have more ports than a wall charger, and sometimes come with a separate power supply.

When buying a multi-port charger – whether a wall or desktop model – note that the ports usually have different standards and wattages. This means they won't charge all your devices at the same rate when you have several connected.



Check that any charger you buy has the correct CE logo

Credit: Kimua Group

Also remember that the charger can't exceed its maximum output. The Ugreen Nexode Pro in the box above, for example, has a maximum of 65W, so you could charge a 45W laptop, and share the remaining 20W between two low-wattage phones.

Beware of fake chargers

Amazon has clamped down on fake chargers since 2016, when Apple claimed that 90 per cent of iPhone chargers sold on the site were counterfeit. However, disreputable retailers will always try to sneak poorly made devices on to the site, so don't be complacent when shopping for chargers. To get an idea of the damage they can cause, read how a fake charger caught fire and destroyed this family home: www.snipca.com/49720.

There are several ways to check whether a charger is genuine, though they're easier to do when buying in person rather than online. First, make sure there's a gap of at least 9.5mm between the edge of the plug's pins and the edge of the charger. A smaller gap increases the risk of electric shock.

Never buy a charger that has no branding on it. These are likely to be dangerous models made in China for next to nothing. Also look for the CE ('conformité Européenne') mark, which will continue to be accepted in the UK indefinitely, alongside the new UKCA mark. Make sure it's the genuine CE mark, and not the almost-identical 'China Export' mark, which doesn't offer any guarantees of quality or safety (pictured left). ca

Problems **Solved**

Our experts solve all your tech problems

PROBLEM OF THE FORTNIGHT

How can I make File Explorer recognise my SSD?

Q I originally installed two SSDs (one 250GB, one 1TB) in my mini PC. After installing Windows 10 on the smaller of the two drives, both were visible in File Explorer. However, since upgrading to Windows 11 the 1TB drive no longer appears in File Explorer. Could you suggest a possible remedy to this problem?

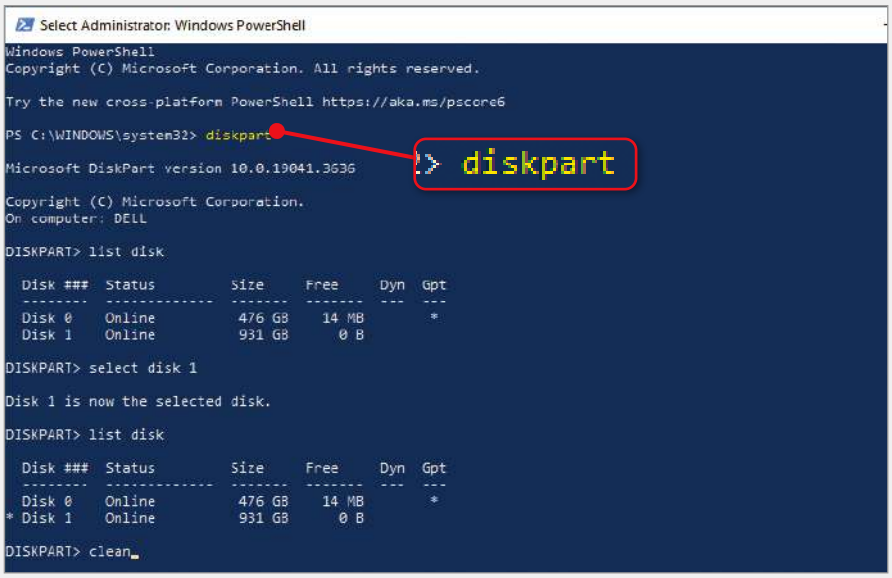
Eryl Jones

A This is a little odd. First, press Windows key+X to open the Quick Link menu and then choose Disk Management. What you do next depends on what you see. If the 1TB drive doesn't appear, open your mini PC and check the connections are firmly in place, and haven't come loose. If it *does* appear in Disk Management, it should be recoverable.

In the unlikely event that Disk Management labels the drive as 'Not initialized', right-click it and choose Initialize Disk.

Assuming the drive hasn't developed a fault, you should now see its status change to Online and with all its space labelled as Unallocated. Right-click the Unallocated box, then choose New Simple Volume (see screenshot below) and click Next.

After initialising the drive, right-click the Unallocated box and choose New Simple Volume



If File Explorer is failing to recognise one of your drives, type Diskpart into PowerShell

Next, type a number of megabytes for the new partition, or just accept the default amount – which should be the full 1TB (or around 1,000,000MB) and click Next. In the next box that opens, use the dropdown menu to choose a drive letter, then click Next.

Finally, choose the 'Format this volume with the following settings' option, then choose NTFS as the 'File system'. Tick 'Perform a quick format' then click Next followed by Finish.

Hopefully, that should fix your problem. However, if the drive won't initialize or there's some other problem that won't let you configure it via Disk Management, you can use PowerShell to carry out some expert tricks that should bring it back to life. Bear in mind you need to be very careful doing this, as the commands can be unforgiving – and a mistake could mean wiping the wrong drive instantly, with no way back.

First, open the Quick Link menu then choose 'Windows PowerShell (Admin)'. At the PowerShell prompt, type diskpart (see screenshot above) and press Enter. Next, type list disk (with the space) and press Enter. Look at the drive capacities to ensure you know which drive is which, and then type select disk X (replace X with your drive number). In your case, we think this will probably be 1, so you'd type select disk 1 and press Enter.

To confirm you've selected the correct drive, type list disk again and press Enter – an asterisk will mark the selected disk. If you've got the right one, type clean and press Enter. The drive will be wiped more or less instantly. Next, type create partition primary and press Enter. Then, type format fs=ntfs quick, followed by Enter. Expect to wait a minute or two for this to complete.

Finally, assign a drive a letter by typing assign letter=X and pressing Enter (replacing the 'X' with whatever drive letter you'd like to use). Your 1TB SSD is now ready for use, and should appear in File Explorer.

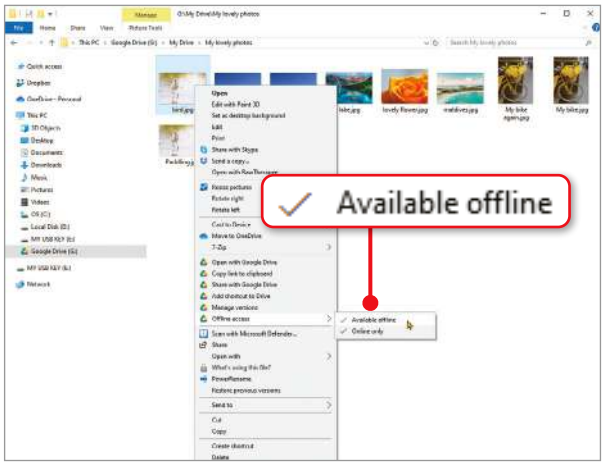
How do I recover my Google Drive photos?

Q Having read Issue 671's excellent 'Stop Google deleting your files' Cover Feature (get it from www.snipca.com/49540), I went to my Google Drive storage page to erase some old files. To my pleasant surprise, I found some old photos from 2017 that I thought I'd lost after one of my previous phones was stolen when I was mugged a few years ago. I'd like to recover these images, but when I attempt to find them on my Google Drive desktop program, they are not there – even though they appear in my Google Drive storage. Could you suggest a way to recover them, please?

Mike Johnston-Price

A Google Drive isn't the most user-friendly online-storage system, with options to either mirror or stream files – and then there are multiple sub-options depending on which of those two you choose.

Streaming is the default option, and it means files only 'exist' online. When you want to access one, it is 'streamed' to your PC by the desktop version of Google Drive. In this mode, files or folders that you want to make permanently available offline – either for instant access or for when you're away from an internet connection – must be marked as such. To do this, you need to first right-click the files/folder, then hover over 'Offline access' before clicking to tick 'Available offline' (see screenshot).



Tick this right-click option to make your Google Drive files permanently available when you're offline

The 'Mirror files' option, which can be set in Google Drive by first clicking its Settings cog followed by Preferences and then Google Drive, does what you might guess – which is to exactly mirror the contents of your online Google Drive with your desktop version. So, the files 'exist' in both places, and any changes, additions or deletions are immediately mirrored on both.

Either way, however, you should be able to 'see' all files in your Google Drive desktop program, so we're not sure why you can see your old photos only online – though this can sometimes result from shared folders becoming 'orphaned' by their original owner deleting the folder.

Restarting Google Drive desktop will force it to re-sync. If that doesn't help, you can just download the files directly from the web version of Google Drive. Log in as normal, then right-click the photo folder or photos before choosing Download. To select multiple folders or photos, hold down the Control (Ctrl) or Shift key.

How do I check the total size of files in my Recycle Bin?

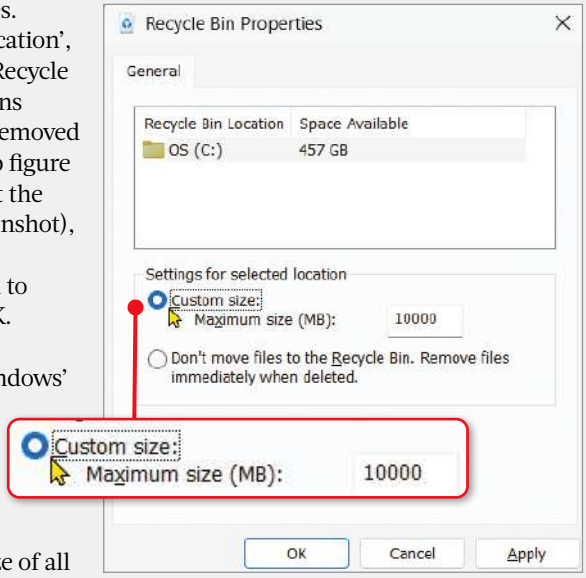
Q I recently deleted loads of duplicate photos from my hard drive, sending them to the recycle bin. Later, I wanted to check the total space I had saved. However, there seems to be no way to check the size of all the files in the Recycle Bin in Windows 11. If I open the C:\$Recycle.Bin folder and select Properties I see a tiny figure for Size and 0Kb for 'Size on disk'. Do you know any way to show the real size of the files?

Paul Davies

A The specific method you're using should show the total size, so we wonder if files are being sent to the recycle bin at all?

To check this, first right-click the recycle bin icon on your Windows desktop then choose Properties. Under 'Settings for selected location', if the 'Don't move files to the Recycle Bin...' option is selected it means deleted files are immediately removed – which could explain the 0Kb figure you're seeing. So instead select the 'Custom size' option (see screenshot), and then whatever size (in megabytes) you want to assign to your recycle bin, then click OK.

If this doesn't help, you can check the current total via Windows' Disk Cleanup utility. Click Start, type disk cleanup then click Disk Cleanup. Now simply scroll through the 'Files to delete' list to find the recycle bin entry – the total size of all files and folders it currently holds is displayed alongside it.



Select the 'Custom size' option in Recycle Bin properties to show the total size of its contents

Can I use my Samsung tablet as a Fire Cube display?

Q I have an Amazon Fire Cube streaming media player and would like to use it with my Samsung Tab S tablet. I've bought an HDMI-to-USB adapter to plug into my tablet, but is there a program I can use that lets me watch Fire Cube content on my tablet's screen?

Leo de Cristofano

A The Amazon Fire Cube lacks a controller that lets it connect directly to HDMI devices as an input source, so a 'dumb' cable won't work.

You could potentially set something up using an 'active' HDMI-based video-capture card, such as the Ugreen model (£18 from www.snipca.com/49367 – pictured below) and then use an app such as USB Camera Standard (free from www.snipca.com/49368) to view the live capture of the HDMI source.

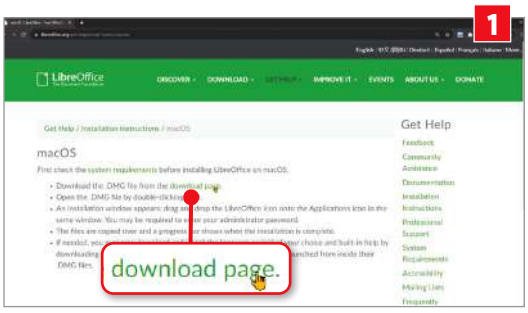
However, connecting an external streaming device to a tablet is an unnecessarily complicated setup, when you can simply install and run all the same apps directly on the tablet – so that would definitely be our advice.

You can connect your Amazon Fire Cube to your tablet via a video-capture card like this Ugreen model

How do I open LibreOffice documents on an iPhone?

Q I use Windows 10 Home and LibreOffice 7.5 – keeping both fully up to date. I sent a LibreOffice Writer ODF document to an iPhone and a Mac, but apparently neither can read the document. Do you have a solution to this problem? Should I be saving the document in a different format or is the problem one that can be dealt with easily by the Apple user?

Peter Shergold

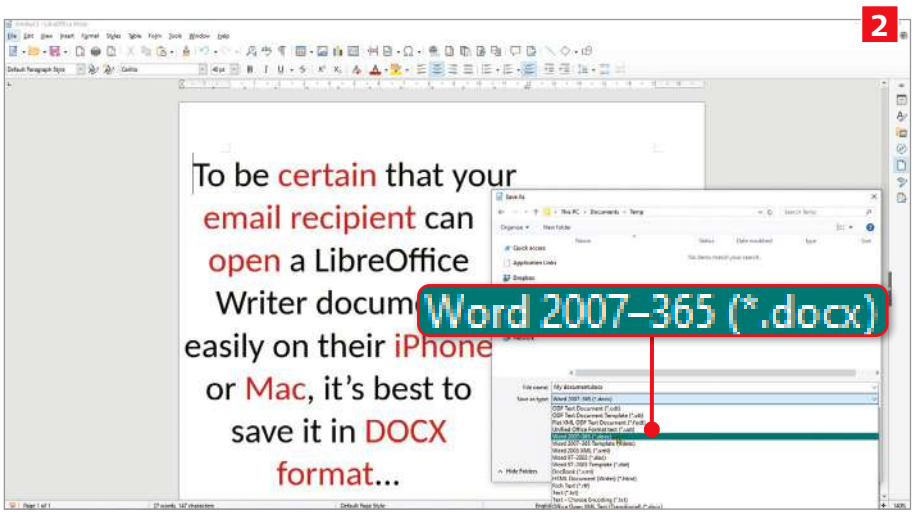


Install LibreOffice on your MacBook or iMac...

A ODF stands for Open Document Format and it's the default document format for all LibreOffice apps. As you can probably guess, ODF is an open-source format – meaning any company or software is free to support it or not. However, it's fair to say that Apple's interest in supporting ODF is half-hearted at best, leaving it in the main to third-party software developers to do this job.

The upshot is that few, if any, of Apple's own apps on iPhones, iPads and Mac computers will directly open ODF documents for either editing or viewing. So, the only solution for dealing with ODF files on iOS or macOS is to use non-Apple tools. On the iPhone LibreOffice developer, The Document Foundation, recommends the free Collabora Office (www.snipca.com/49369). As for Mac, the full LibreOffice suite is actually available for macOS, as a free download from www.snipca.com/49370 (see screenshot above).

Alternatively, and perhaps easier here, you can simply save your Writer documents as DOCX format (see screenshot below), as this is widely supported by Apple's apps.



...alternatively, convert your document to the more widely supported DOCX format

Q: How can we make landline calls during power cuts?

A: Issue 667, page 69 – find it on our 2023 Back Issue CD

Buy it from www.snipca.com/48860

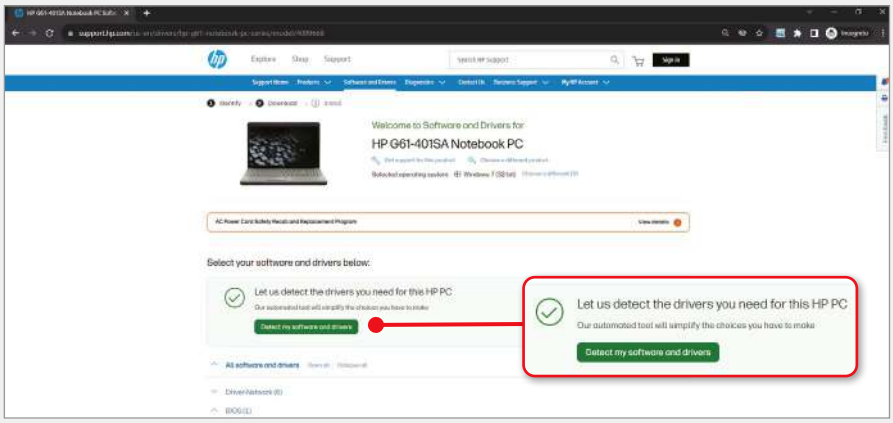
How do I boot Tiny11 without a USB stick?

Q As a regular reader for a few years I've enjoyed taking on your various projects. The most recent one I tackled was the Tiny11 (www.snipca.com/49448) project from Issue 670 (page 60) – to put a lightweight version of Windows 11 on an old laptop.

I have a 14-year-old HP G61 laptop that's ideal for this project. Downloading the tool went fine, but Tiny11 is too big to put on a DVD so I put it on an 8GB USB stick. I then entered my G61's BIOS, ready to change the startup sequence to USB – but there's no USB option. I can choose only the optical drive or floppy disk.

Any thoughts on my next move?

Frank Hill



On HP's support page, click 'Detect my software and drivers' to see if you need a BIOS update

A We don't know your *exact* laptop model but, given its age, you might be out of luck on the ability to start up from a USB stick.

We know you've accessed the BIOS to try to change the boot order, but some HP laptops also have a separate Boot Device Options menu – have you tried that? When you switch on the machine, first press Escape (Esc) to access the BIOS Startup Menu, then press F9 to see what boot options are available.

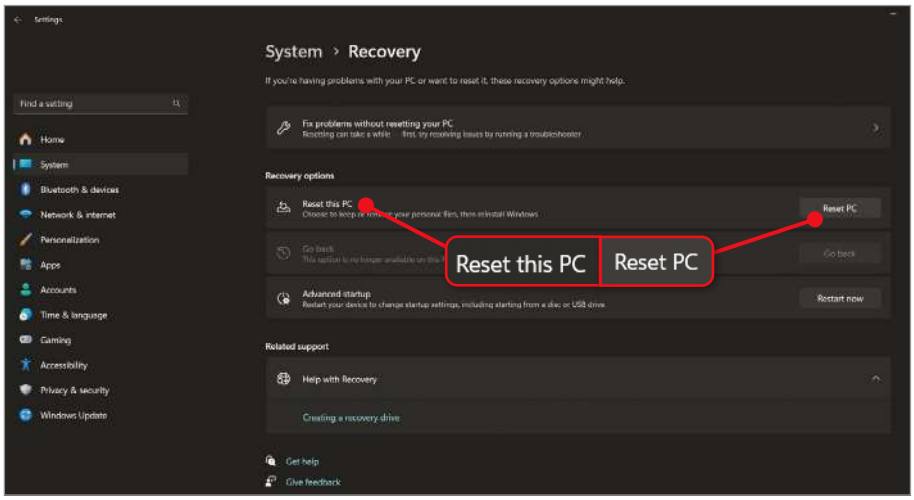
You could also try updating your machine's BIOS to the latest available from HP. Visit its support page, at www.snipca.com/49375, to see what you can find for your model. Here, click 'Detect my software and drivers' to see if you need a BIOS update (see screenshot): it's very possible that a later BIOS will add the ability to boot from a USB stick.

If this doesn't help, you can burn a DVD from the Tiny11 ISO file and boot that way. We think you might be confused by the fact that Tiny11 needs 8GB of hard-drive space to run. However, the ISO file itself is just 4.2GB, and will fit on a standard DVD.

How do I install Windows 11 after a factory reset?

Q I received my free copy of Windows 11 by clicking a message that said I could update simply by clicking a small icon in the message window. That was great, but now I want to carry out a factory reset – and that's got me thinking. Once I start this where do I get my copy of Windows from? As I said, the last one came from clicking a small icon, which won't be there if I'm performing a clean install. Any pointers would be helpful.

Esse Barbero



In the Recovery section of Settings, next to 'Reset this PC', click the Reset PC button

A There are two answers to your question. First, you can ask Windows 11 to 'reset' itself. If subsequently you choose the option to remove everything then, in effect, the result will be a 'clean' install. This is because Windows 11 will reinstall itself, removing everything from your PC, other than the operating system.

To do this, first click Start, followed by the Settings cog, then System, followed by Recovery. Then, next to 'Reset this PC', click the Reset PC button (see screenshot). Finally, click 'Remove everything' then follow the prompts. When prompted, choose 'Cloud download' (as opposed to 'Local reinstall') to ensure that your computer gets the very latest version of Windows 11.

Alternatively, you can do this 'manually'. Download Microsoft's free media-creation tool from www.snipca.com/49371 to make a Windows 11 installation disc or USB stick.

Your licence is stored digitally in your Microsoft account, so Windows 11 (clean-installed on to the same PC) will activate itself after you first log in.

What's wrong with my Moto C phone's battery?

Q I use a Moto C smartphone (pictured right), bought from O2 in 2018. It does what I need, but recently it has needed to be charged more frequently. Then, one evening, it simply stopped working. A local repair shop told me it was defunct. I went to the O2 shop in search of a refurbished replacement, but they directed me to the O2 website.

That evening, the phone sprang back into life, so I put it on the charge. The next day it had lost 25 per cent of its charge. But the following night it lost no charge, and my phone was like new!

Meanwhile, I received both texts and emails from O2 clearly anticipating an imminent sale. Could it be that O2 has been tampering with my phone in order to force me to buy a new one?

Edwin Ovenden

Motorola stopped issuing updates for its Moto C phone a couple of years ago

A Companies use many dubious tactics to persuade customers to replace perfectly good devices, but we doubt O2 has been remotely messing with your phone. Any updates to the phone's software would actually come from Motorola – and it's been a couple of years since the company stopped issuing them for the Moto C.

Instead, your phone is suffering the effects of a failing battery – expect more unpredictable behaviour like this. Thankfully, replacing the battery on your phone is as simple as popping off the back and fitting a new one (iFixit has an excellent illustrated guide at www.snipca.com/49372). Expect to pay around £10–£15 for a replacement battery (www.snipca.com/49373).

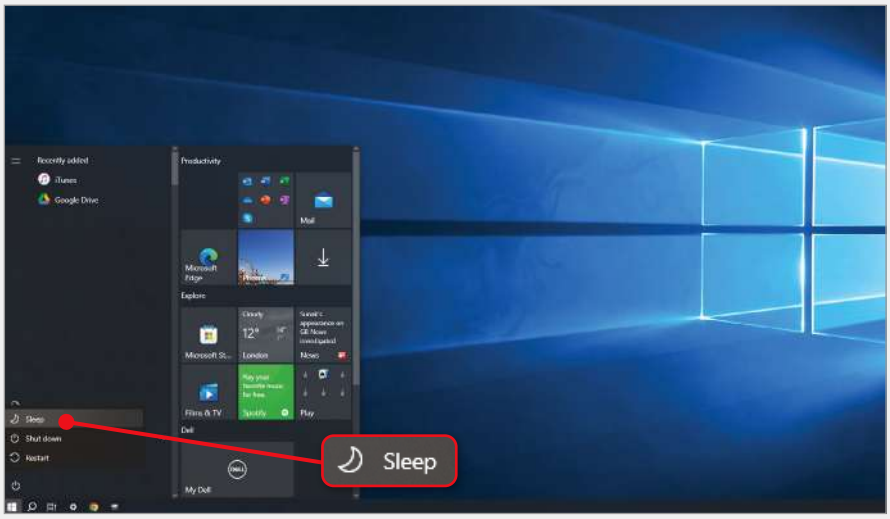
Credit: ifixit.com

The iFixit website has an illustrated guide on how to replace a Moto C battery

Is it worth putting my PC to sleep with my new SSD?

Q I have replaced the hard drive in my Windows 10 desktop PC with a speedy new SSD. So, I wonder, is the sleep function (see screenshot) now of any use?

John Knox



On a desktop computer the benefits of Sleep mode outweigh the energy used

A We suppose it depends what you mean by 'of any use'. An SSD speeds up almost everything a PC does, including startup and shutdown. However, even the fastest SSD won't achieve either of these things instantly.

When a PC is put into 'sleep' mode, a tiny amount of power is used to maintain the state of the RAM (memory) chips, so that the computer can in effect pick up from where it left off – without starting up or shutting down. It is, generally, faster than these alternatives.

It can make sense to do without the sleep function. On a laptop, for example, shutting down completely will conserve battery life. Equally, modern laptops use so little power during sleep that it's barely worth worrying about from a cost or environmental perspective. But on your mains-powered desktop PC, the minor speed benefits of sleep probably outweigh the tiny amount of energy it uses.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN...

DAB and DAB+?

Q I saw a news story about the BBC launching some new radio stations, including a Radio 2 spin-off that was to have the late Steve Wright as a presenter – god rest his soul. The article said this and the other stations will be available on DAB+ and BBC Sounds. I do have BBC Sounds on my basic Android phone, but I barely use it because I mainly listen to the radio in the kitchen on a little set I bought from Argos a few years ago. This says DAB on the front, but not DAB+. I assume DAB+ is some sort of upgraded system? Will my existing radio be able to get these new BBC stations? If not, why not?

Walter Mitchell

A You're right that DAB+ is an advance on the original Digital Audio Broadcasting (DAB) standard, essentially allowing more digital information to be piped over the same amount of radio bandwidth – and therefore allowing space for additional stations. Currently, it co-exists with DAB, so some stations continue to be broadcast on DAB, while others are available only on DAB+. However, while the new technology is able to make use of existing broadcast transmitters, radios do specifically need to be able to decode DAB+ signals.

Whether your particular set is able to is impossible for us to say, but DAB+ didn't formally launch until 2016 – so if you purchased your radio before then, it almost certainly won't support the newer standard.

Digital Radio UK, the industry group charged with managing and communicating matters relating to DAB and DAB+, does offer a 'tick mark' (pictured above) that manufacturers can use on devices. However, this tends to be used only on packaging, rather than radios themselves. There are also two different logos, one slightly newer, but both indicate compatibility with both DAB and DAB+ (www.snipca.com/49376).

A DAB+ radio has space for more stations than a DAB radio

You can see what DAB and DAB+ stations you should be able to receive in your area by using Digital Radio UK's postcode checker at www.snipca.com/49377.

If your radio doesn't receive all the channels it should, use its retune function to update the channel list. If no DAB+ stations appear at all, it's probably not compatible with DAB+.

A basic DAB+ radio costs around £30 – such as the Bush model pictured above: www.snipca.com/49535.

Want to know the difference between technical terms? Email noproblem@computeractive.co.uk

Is my Music Maker installation DVD a threat to my PC?

Q I've had an installation DVD for Magix Music Maker 17 (pictured) knocking around for a long time, and have finally got around to installing it on my Windows 10 PC. During the installation process, however, my Kaspersky antivirus software warned me that it was software that could be used by criminals to damage my computer, so I decided to abort the installation. I was surprised that it could be so risky.

Was I wise to abort, or do you think I could have continued safely? I would like to try Music Maker if possible.

Alan Turk

A legitimate copy of Music Maker 17 should, if compatible with Windows 10/11, be safe to use

A Assuming that the DVD is an original, boxed copy that you bought from a legitimate, trusted retailer, we can't imagine that the program on it was originally anything other than safe.

However, there are a couple of factors to consider. The first is that this version of Music Maker is well over a decade old, and was made for the world of Windows XP and 7. That doesn't necessarily mean it's incompatible with Windows 10 or 11 (though we don't have it to test), but it's possible that it contains code that Kaspersky considers unsafe by modern standards.

Also, dodgy versions of the software are available for download online, and could contain viruses. Kasperky's scanning engine will certainly be aware of this, so it could be triggering a warning based on that knowledge.

All considered, we think that in your case this is just a false positive and that it's probably safe to proceed. However, we obviously can offer no guarantees, including whether this aged version of the program will run reliably in modern versions of Windows.

Next Issue

ON SALE Weds 10 Apr

- Can I back up two PCs to a single OneDrive?
- How do I search inside files?
- Can I still upgrade to Windows 10?

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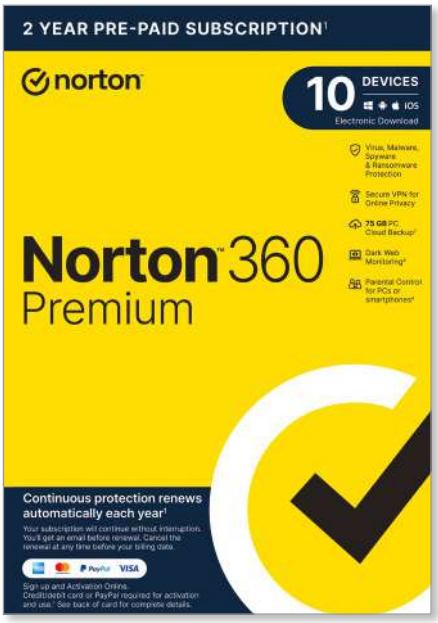

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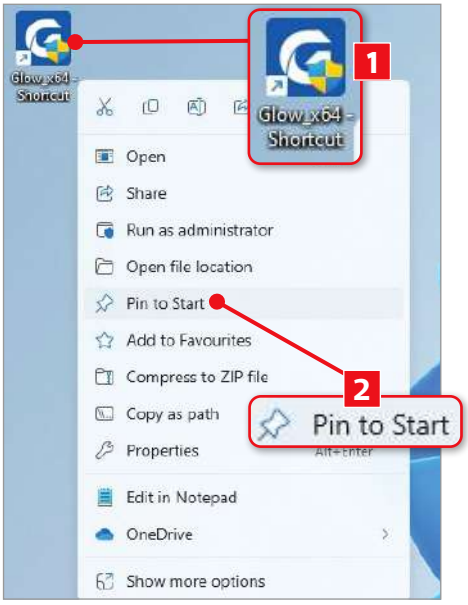
How do I get Glow to work?

Q I installed Glow (www.snipca.com/49138) as you recommended in Issue 677 (page 62), but there's no trace of it in the Start menu or in the Program Files/Program Files (x86) folders. However, when I search my hard drive I see many Glow-related files scattered around my system – although no EXE launch file. How do I get Glow to work? And if I can't, how do I remove it? I use Windows 10 with a 64bit AMD processor.

Howard R Damm

A Glow is a portable tool, so it doesn't need to be installed, which is why you won't find it in the Windows Start menu. Instead, you'll just need to go to the Downloads folder (or wherever you saved its ZIP file) then right-click the file and select Extract All. This will unzip the file and create a new Glow folder within Downloads – open this and double-click the 'Glow_x64.exe' file inside.

You can of course create your own shortcut to Glow, making it easier to locate next time you want to launch it.



Create a desktop shortcut for Glow and pin it to your Start menu for easy access

To do so in Windows 11, right-click the 'Glow_x64.exe' file and select 'Show more options' at the bottom. Doing so will reveal the full list of right-click menu options, including 'Create shortcut' – selecting this will create a shortcut to Glow within your unzipped folder, which you can then drag to your desktop.

Simply double-click this shortcut to launch Glow. Or, if you prefer, right-click the desktop shortcut (1 in our screenshot below left) and select 'Pin to Start' 2 to create a shortcut to Glow that you can access from your Start menu.

If you still want to remove the tool, just drag the Glow folder, along with the original ZIP file, into the recycle bin. Again, because it's a portable tool, you don't need to uninstall it.

How do I scan QR code to set up smart plug?

Q Following Issue 676's Cover Feature on smart plugs, I bought a Meross Plug MSS315 (£35 from www.snipca.com/49356). It asked me to scan a QR code to set it up, but it has no numbers underneath the code. Please could you help me by emailing me a copy of the QR code?

Pat Dale

A Confusingly, some Meross products are supplied with more than one QR code. The code you need to scan to set the device up is the one you'll find on the label that's on the smart plug itself, not what's printed in the supplied leaflet, which just opens a page to download the Meross app. The QR code label should look similar to the one pictured above right – which is taken from Meross's own instructions.

These QR codes are unique to each device, so there wouldn't be any point in providing you with ours. If you can't find a QR code label anywhere on your Meross smart plug, we'd suggest contacting the retailer you bought it from, as you may need to ask for a replacement.

Set up a Meross smart plug using the QR code on the plug itself, not in the supplied leaflet

Is it safe to run FixWin?

Q You've often recommended system tool FixWin (www.snipca.com/47803), most recently in Issue 674 (page 51). However, when I tried to run it, Bitdefender detected it as malware and quarantined it. I think you've mentioned that Microsoft would show a warning and that we should ignore it. But what about Bitdefender? What's curious is that I ran FixWin a few days earlier and Bitdefender didn't warn me about it.

Don Sellick

A Don't worry – FixWin is perfectly safe. It sounds as if Bitdefender simply flagged it up as a false positive. FixWin's developer itself says this might happen because of how it accesses and alters system files.

It's interesting that you say Bitdefender didn't attempt to quarantine FixWin when you first tried it. Similarly, when we attempted to reproduce your problem, we found that the latest version of Bitdefender allowed us to run FixWin without any warnings. Antivirus tools are constantly updating their databases, however. So when you tried to run FixWin on the second occasion, Bitdefender's antivirus definitions at that time just happened to include a false-positive result for FixWin.

Jargon Buster

1080p High-definition video: 1920x1080 pixels.

32bit/64bit A measure of how much data a PC can process at once. Most older computers are 32bit, more modern ones are 64bit.

3G/4G/5G Technologies that deliver faster mobile broadband.

8K Video with a resolution of 7680x4320 pixels. Currently the highest resolution available.

AAC A type of music file.

ADSL A technology that converts a standard phone line into a broadband internet connection.

AI Artificial intelligence. Intelligence demonstrated by a machine rather than a human being.

Alexa routine A feature on Echo smart speakers that lets you trigger a series of actions using a voice command.

AMOLED An alternative technology to LCD for creating flatscreens.

APN Access point name. The gateway between a mobile network such as 4G and 5G and another network, usually the internet.

Aspect ratio A measurement of the shape of a screen. Traditional PC screens are 4:3. Widescreen displays are 16:9 or 16:10.

Bandwidth A measure of how much data can be transferred through a connection at one time.

Benchmarking Comparing software and products with an accepted standard.

Beta A version of software that's being tested.

BIOS Basic Input-Output System. Software built into every PC that connects the vital components.

Bloatware Unwanted software built into a new device.

Bot Automated software designed to perform specific tasks.

cd/m² Candela per square metre. Standard unit of brightness.

Chatbot A computer program designed to recreate conversation with human users.

Clean install An operating system installation that overwrites all other content on the hard drive.

Code Programming languages used to create software.

Cookie A small text file stored on your computer by a website.

Core Units on a processor that carry out program instructions.

CPU Central Processing Unit. Another term for a computer processor.

CSS Cascading Style Sheets. An HTML feature that lets web designers choose how elements on a website look.

Dark mode Showing white text on a black background.

DCI-P3 A colour space that has a wider spectrum than sRGB.

Dithering A process that uses dots of colour or black to give the impression of more colours, or shades of grey.

DNS Domain Name System. A technology that associates computers with their addresses on the internet.

Domain These are used to identify one or more IP addresses.

Emoji A small graphic that can be inserted into a text message or email.

End-to-end encryption A way of encrypting messages so that the only people who can read them are the sender and recipient.

Ethernet A standard used for almost all wired computer networks.

EXE A program file designed to run in Windows.

EXIF Exchangable Image File Format. A method for storing extra data inside digital photo files.

Factory reset Restoring a device to the manufacturer's default settings.

False positive When an antivirus program wrongly detects malware.

Favicon A small icon for a website, usually appearing in the address and bookmark bars of a browser.

Fingerprinting A tracking method used by websites to identify you from the device and software you're using.

Frame rate Number of still images shown per second to create a moving image.

FTTC Fibre-to-the-cabinet. A broadband technology that uses fibre-optic cable between a phone exchange and street cabinets.

FTTP Fibre broadband that goes straight to the doorstep. Faster than FTTC (fibre-to-the-cabinet).

GHz Gigahertz. A measure of how many instructions a chip can process per second.

GIF Graphics Interchange Format. A type of image file used on the web.

Gigabit Internet connection offering speeds of at least 1Gbps (1,000Mbps).

GPU Graphics Processor Unit. A chip designed to create 3D graphics, but which can also be used for other computing tasks.

Graphics card A component in a computer that produces the image shown on the monitor.

H.264 A type of MPEG4 video that is used on Blu-ray discs and recorded by many cameras and camcorders.

H.265 The successor to Advanced Video Coding (AVC). It offers the same level of picture quality as AVC, but with better compression.

HDMI High-definition media interface. Connection that transmits HD video and audio signals.

HTML injection A security exploit where a safe website's code has been replaced with malicious code.

Hz Hertz. Measures the frequency something happens: 1Hz equals once a second.

IP address A unique set of numbers used to identify computers and websites on the internet.

ISO The light sensitivity of a camera.

ISO file A type of image file that contains all the data from a CD or DVD.

Jailbreak Modifying an iPhone, iPod or iPad to get around Apple's restrictions.

JavaScript An older programming language developers use to make web pages interactive.

JSON JavaScript Object Notation. Used to transmit data between a web application and a server.

Lightning connector Apple's own connector.

Mechanical keyboard Keyboards that use spring-loaded mechanisms to press a physical switch.

Metadata A set of data that gives information about a file.

MicroSD card A small type of memory card.

Mobile virtual network operator A mobile provider that piggybacks on another network.

NAS Network-attached storage. A hard drive attached to a network that can be shared with other PCs.

NTFS A file system used by all recent versions of Windows.

OCR Optical character recognition. The process by which printed text is scanned and converted into documents that can be edited.

Open source Software that can be modified by anyone.

OPVault Format used by 1Password to store usernames and passwords.

Partition A large hard drive can be split into two or more partitions or 'virtual' drives.

PCIe A faster version of PCI - a slot on the motherboard for expansion cards.

Phishing A form of internet fraud that tries to trick you into revealing personal details.

PowerShell A Windows tool for automating commands.

PUP A program that may not be desired, despite the user consenting to it being downloaded.

QR code Quick Response code. A barcode that can be read using smartphones.

RAM Random-access memory. The computer's working area.

Refresh rate Measured in Hertz (Hz), the number of times per second that the image on your monitor is redrawn.

Refurbished A second-hand device that has been repaired by its manufacturer so that it can be resold.

RGB Advanced type of LED backlight that projects red, green and blue.

SATA Serial ATA. An interface for connecting hard drives to a PC.

SD card A type of memory card.

SIM The smart card used by all digital mobile phones.

SVG A file format that enables images to be expanded without loss of details.

sRGB A standard RGB colour space for use on monitors.

Speaker driver Cone-shaped part of the speaker that converts audio signals into sound waves.

SSD Solid-state drive. Storage that uses no moving parts.

Switch Mechanism under a keyboard that determines whether a key has been pressed.

Tethering Turning a phone into a modem to give internet access to a computer.

Thunderbolt A very fast port for connecting external storage to a computer.

Tooltip A small message that appears when the cursor hovers over an option.

Transition A way of joining two video clips together or moving from one clip to another.

Travel The distance the keys of a keyboard have to be pressed before the keystroke is recognised.

USB 2.0/3.0/3.1 Faster successors to USB.

USB-A The original type of USB connector, released in 1996.

USB-C A new connector that's reversible.

Video-capture card An expansion card for PCs that allows them to record full-motion video sequences.

VoIP The routing of voice conversations over the internet.

VPN Virtual private network. Keeps all internet communication safe and private.

Waveform An image that represents an audio signal or recording.

White balance Adjusts the balance of colours in an image to make them look more natural.

Wi-Fi 6E Wi-Fi 6 extended to include the 6GHz band.

Wi-Fi card Adds Wi-Fi connectivity to a computer.

Widget A small program such as a calendar that runs on the Windows desktop.

WMA Windows Media Audio, an audio format created by Microsoft.

ZIP file A file that contains compressed documents or files.

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Easy when you

Know How

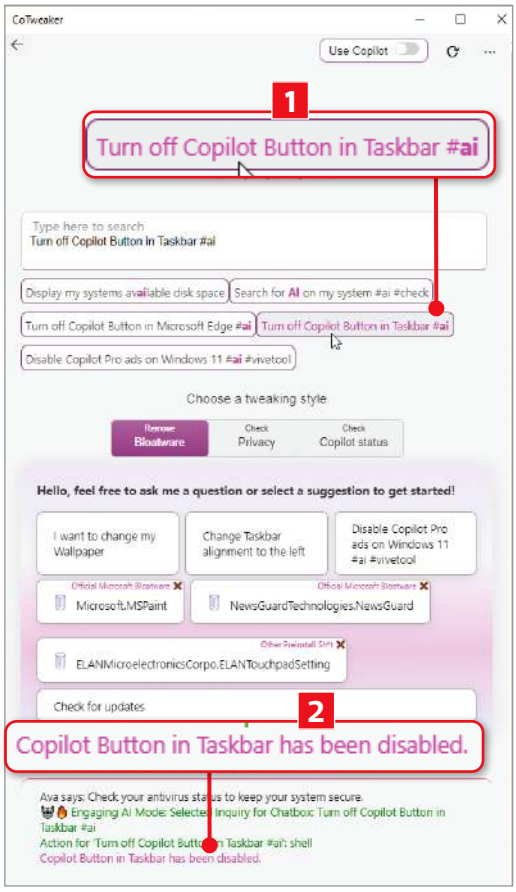
Seeking a simple way to disable Microsoft Copilot in Windows, **Robert Irvine** tries to...

Remove AI junk using AI

Hey, did you hear? Microsoft's got a new AI assistant called Copilot, which will revolutionise how you use your PC and the web. Strange that it's kept so quiet about it – hopefully we'll learn more soon.

I'm being sarcastic, of course, because in the last year, Microsoft Copilot has become impossible to avoid. It's now built into Edge, Microsoft 365 and the Windows 11 taskbar, and will soon be added to OneDrive, Notepad and File Explorer. Microsoft is even introducing a Copilot key on Windows keyboards (see Issue 675, page 49), so there'll be no escape from the ruddy thing.

This is obviously great news if you like AI tools, but I can't help feeling it's too much too soon and Microsoft is effectively shoving Copilot down our throats. So I was interested to read about a new program called BloatynosyAI, which promises to remove Copilot and other bloatware from Windows 10 and 11. The clever part is that it fights AI *with* AI, by letting you ask it to disable unwanted features.



CoTweaker claimed to have disabled Copilot in Robert's taskbar but the AI assistant remained

BloatynosyAI is a silly name, bringing to mind the old Mr Chad cartoons that draped their big hooters over walls to enquire 'wot, no chips?' and the like. The developer must have realised this, because by the time I went to download the program from www.snipca.com/49552, it had been given the more sensible name of CoTweaker.

I clicked the 'CoTweaker.zip' link on the Releases page (www.snipca.com/49553) to download the ZIP file to my Windows 11 PC, extracted its contents and double-clicked the 'CoTweaker.exe' file. Inevitably, Microsoft Defender SmartScreen sprang into action, but VirusTotal gave the file a clean bill of health (see the evidence at www.snipca.com/49554), so I clicked 'More info' then 'Run anyway'.

CoTweaker opened in a side panel that looked very similar to Copilot's – in fact there was a 'Use Copilot' option in the top-right corner for switching to Microsoft's tool. It also displayed a greeting from a 'friendly companion' called Ava, which said its sibling was Microsoft Copilot "but we don't always see eye to eye".

Usefully, Ava provided a list of suggestions to help me get started with removing bloatware, including 'Turn off Copilot button in Microsoft Edge'. I clicked this and the program confirmed that the 'Copilot Button in Edge has been disabled', which indeed it was when I checked the browser.

> "CoTweaker's Copilot failure means I can't even finish this column by saying 'wot, no AI?'"

Spurred by my success, I typed AI in CoTweaker's search box and selected the options 'Turn off Copilot Button in Taskbar' (1 in our screenshot) and 'Disable Copilot Pro ads on Windows 11'. But the Copilot button stubbornly remained on my taskbar even though Ava claimed it was gone 2.

Restarting and retrying didn't help, and as Copilot hasn't yet 'rolled out' to my Windows 10 laptop, I couldn't verify if removal was more reliable on that device.

I had more luck with CoTweaker's other options, which let me get rid of the Widgets button, OneDrive and various preinstalled apps. It listed more than 170 in total, but I was wary of uninstalling them all in case they later proved to be important.

I eventually hid Copilot by switching off its option in Windows 11's 'Taskbar settings', but was disappointed that CoTweaker failed to disable the tool as promised. What's more, I can't even finish this column by saying 'wot, no AI?'.

Perhaps we can expect more clashes like this between AI assistants in years to come, in a never-ending battle of the bots.

Need help removing AI bloatware? Let us know: noproblem@computeractive.co.uk

Next issue: Robert tries to use Tor without his ISP knowing

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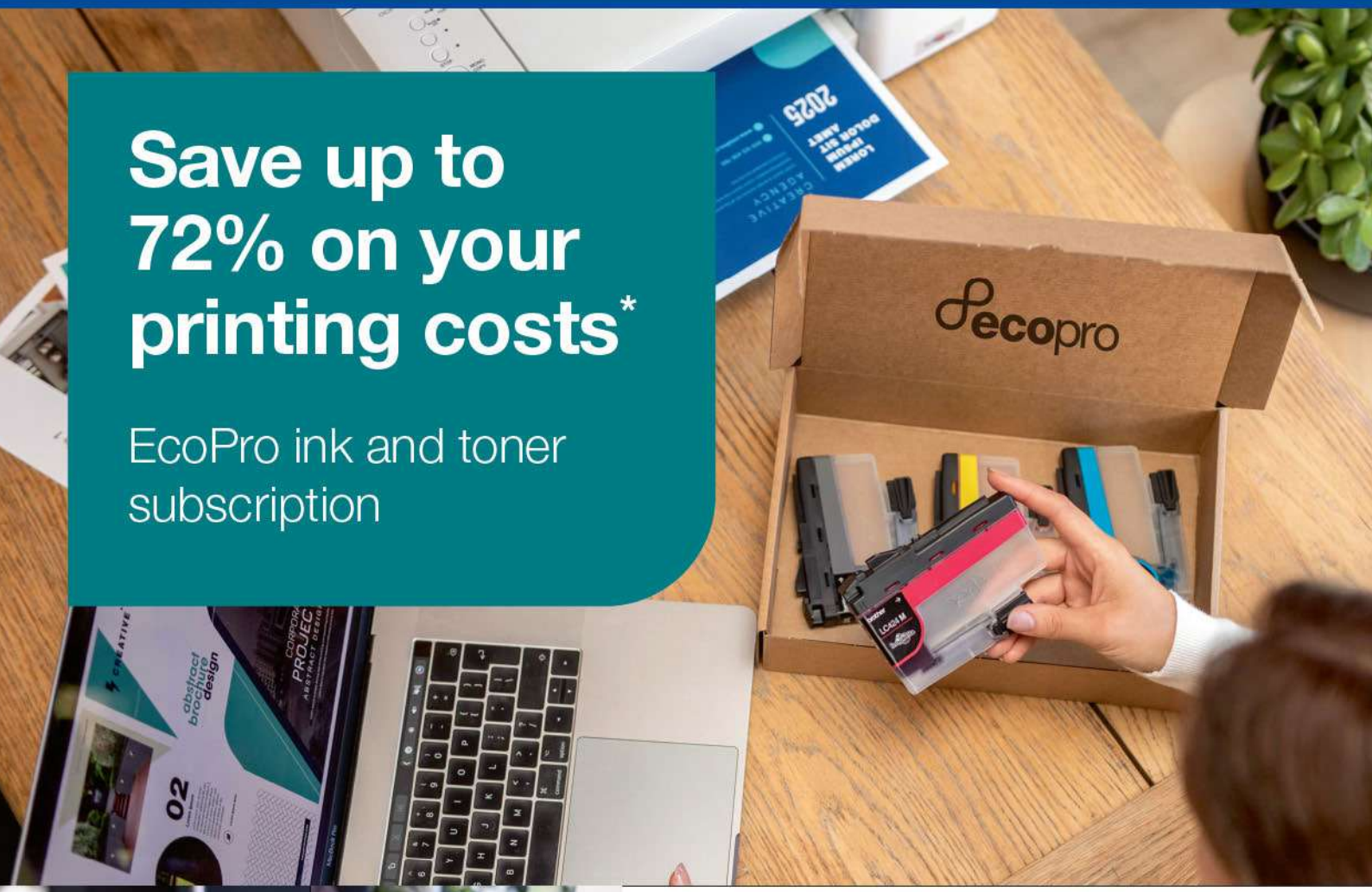

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